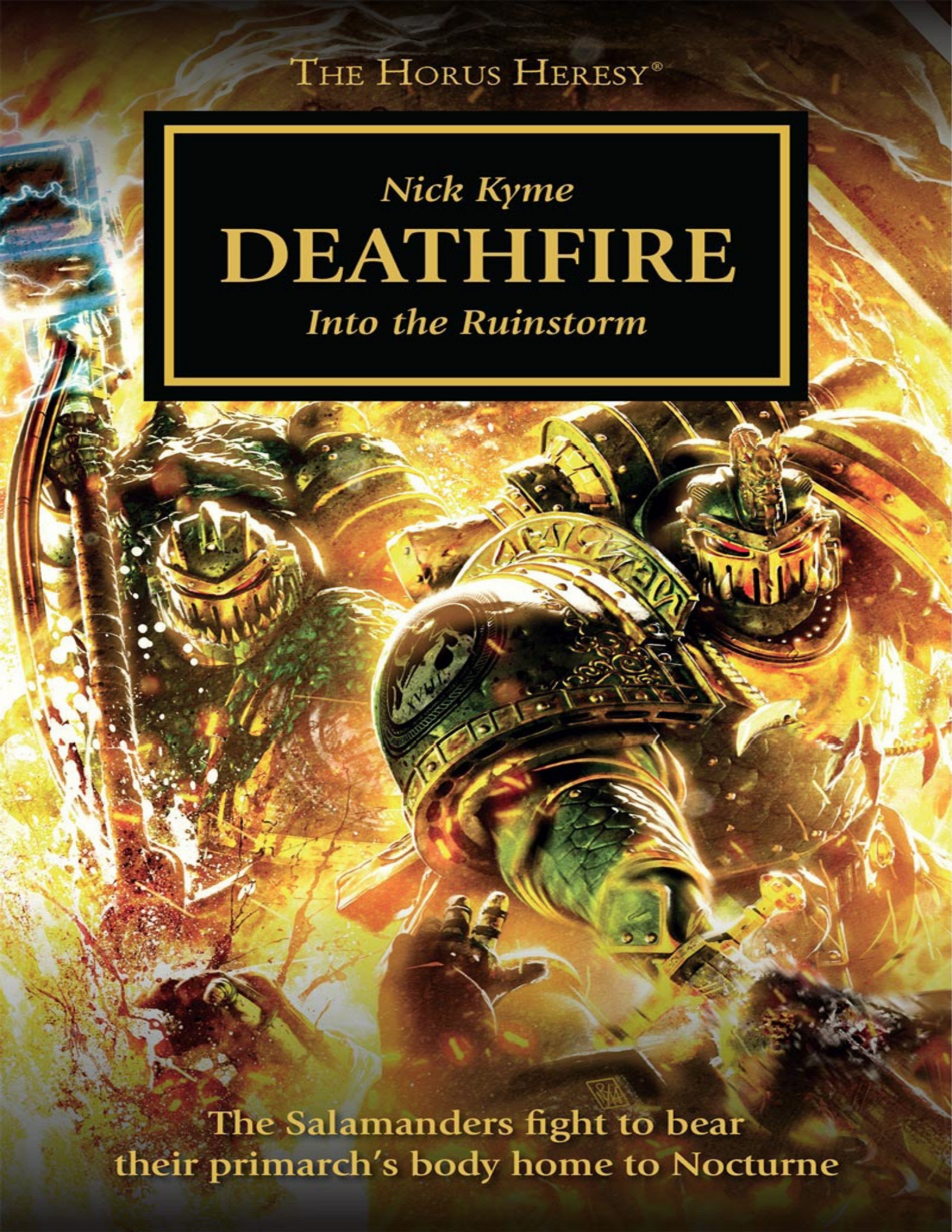
THE HORUS HERESY®

Nick Kyme

DEATHFIRE

Into the Ruinstorm



The Salamanders fight to bear
their primarch's body home to Nocturne

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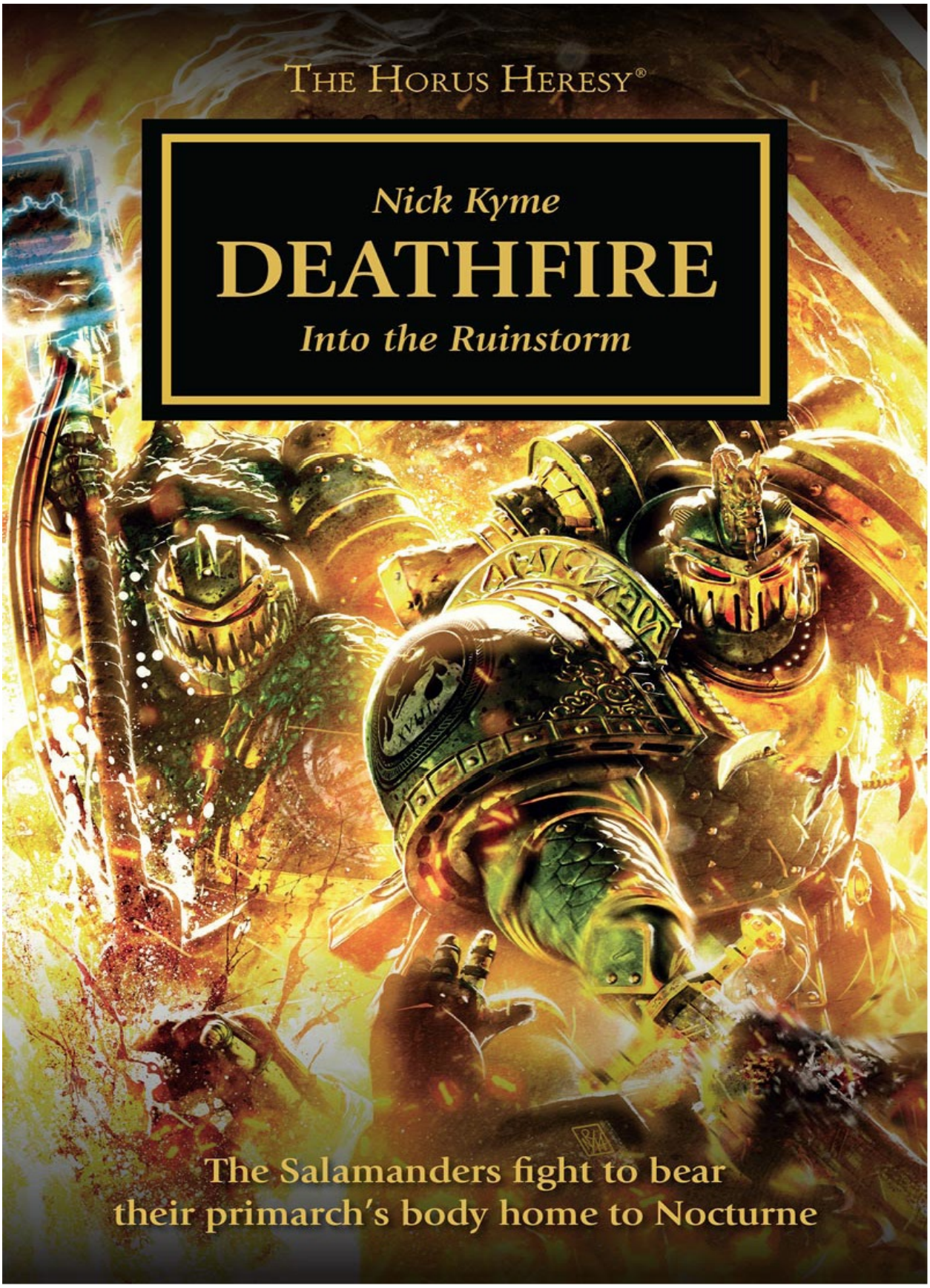
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THE HORUS HERESY®

Nick Kyme

DEATHFIRE

Into the Ruinstorm

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THE HORUS HERESY®

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind
to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

SANGUINIUS, The Blood Angel, ruler of Imperium Secundus
ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN, Master of Ultramar, and the Avenging Son
LION EL'JONSON, Lord Protector of Imperium Secundus

VULKAN, Lord of Drakes [deceased]

ROGAL DORN, The Emperor's Praetorian

The XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

ARTELLUS NUMEON, Pyre captain, former equerry to Vulkan
NOMUS RHY'TAN, Voice of Fire and Keeper of the Keys
PHAESTUS VAR'KIR, Igniax Chaplain
USHAMANN, Librarius Epistolary
ORHN, Firedrake
RAN'D, Firedrake

REK'OR XATHEN, Pyroclast sergeant
BADUK, Pyroclast
KUR'AK, Pyroclast
MU'GARNA, Pyroclast
ZADAR, Pyroclast

BAREK ZYTOS, Legionary sergeant
ABIDEMI, Legionary
DAKAR, Legionary
IGEN GARGO, Legionary

Feron, Legionary
Kadir, Legionary
Mur'ak, Legionary
Ungan, Legionary
Vorko, Legionary
Xorn, Legionary

Far'kor Zonn, Techmarine

Kolo Adyssian, Shipmaster of the *Charybdis*
Arikk Gullero, Lieutenant, first officer
Lyssa Esenzi, Flag lieutenant, helm officer
Circe, Navigator

The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'

Titus Prayto, Master of the Presiding Centuria, Librarius
Valentius, Legionary sergeant

Aeonid Thiel, Sergeant, commander of the Red-marked
Vitus Inviglio, Red-marked
Bracheus, Red-marked
Corvun, Red-marked
Drusus, Red-marked
Finius, Red-marked
Gordianius, Red-marked
Laertes, Red-marked
Leargus, Red-marked
Naevius, Red-marked
Petronius, Red-marked
Venator, Red-marked

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

QUOR GALLEK, ‘The Preacher’, former Chaplain, Dark Apostle magister
XENUT SUL, Unburdened
DEGAT, Master sergeant, on board the *Monarchia*

BARTHUSA NAREK, Former Vigilator

The XIV Legion ‘Death Guard’

MALIG LAESTYGON, Legionary commander
UKTEG, Sergeant

RACK, Shipmaster of the *Reaper’s Shroud*

The Knights Errant

KASPIAN HECHT

THE PROPHECY OF THE ONE-EYED KING

A mountain looms above you, wreathed in mourning cloud. Crags claw upwards, grasping towards a blood-red light at its summit. The sky is ablaze and reflects the mountain's anger as it casts down flame from above. It is troubled, wounded by those who tried to put it asunder. It rages, and its wrath is terrible to behold.

A bleak mood is upon you, a hollow mantle that bears more weight than a curse. Your bare feet are blistered and bloody, for you have walked many leagues across the cutting rock of your death world.

It has not been forgiving.

But your journey is slowly reaching its end, its conclusion closer with every crimson impression you leave behind you.

Scarred peaks rise to blot out the sun, though the heat of that glowering orb is still merciless, stealing breath, drying out life until nothing remains but a dusty carcass.

At the hell-stoked foothills, you begin your ascent. Cinder and hot ash sear your feet, but you barely feel it.

Hand over hand, the climb is tough, but you are driven beyond the concerns of fatigue. Your mind is a dense, dark pool from which you know you will not resurface. Your body will obey, despite the screaming agony in your limbs, to which you are blind, deaf and dumb.

You rise with the numbness and monotony of a corpse given life after death, for are you not merely flesh-wrapped despair, your weary bones responding to the last vestiges of your will?

From the summit you hear a rumble to eclipse the crash of oceans at full swell, a thunderous bellow from the deep earth that echoes across peak and crag. And as your eye is drawn to the burgeoning fire glow above, you see a fissure in the

flank of the mountain.

Heat and earth-blood issue from within this crack. The trailing wisps of smoke entice your enfeebled mind, so blighted by a son's incomparable sorrow.

Above you, the rumble of the mountain's displeasure grows into a roar. Does its anguish resonate with your own, an empathic frequency that has somehow aligned rock and flesh in grief-stricken sympathy?

Fire rises, soaring upwards in a burning pillar that taints sky, sun and cloud with its fury.

Desperation seizing your dead man's limbs, you struggle for the fissure, discovering a cleft wide enough to admit your body.

And as the heavens weep tears of flame, you enter the mountain to find your sanctuary and your doom. The last image of your existence is obscured by pyroclastic cloud until eventually nothing remains but a shadow and a memory.

PART ONE
UNQUIET

ONE

Burnt offerings

Traoris, the lightning fields

A body lay in the grey ash.

Transhuman, male. His skin was the colour of coal, and his battered armour had scalloped edges, as though it had been fashioned from green scales. A Salamander. A sword lay a finger length from his grasp. A warrior. He had met the fate of most who walked that violent road, another corpse amongst many. The wound in his chest the size of a fist had killed him, but his left eye was also badly damaged.

He hadn't been reaching for the sword when he died, though. His still fingers grasped for something else. A hammer.

A flash lit up the sky overhead in veins of pearlescent light.

An eyelid quivered in response, nothing more than a nerve tremor, the last firing of neural synapses before brain death.

Another flash. A bolt of lightning struck the earth. Close.

A finger trembled. Another nerve tremor?

A third flash, thunder resounded.

He blinked, the corpse who was not a corpse, trapping a freeze-frame of what was coming for him across the ash. His other eyelid had been cauterised and stayed shut, a ball of throbbing agony harboured behind it.

Sentience returned, time and place reasserted themselves. Conscious thought resumed. Pain. Much pain…

Lightning arced from the dry and cloudless sky of Traoris.

Numeon blinked again as the bolt jerked wildly, splitting into separate arteries and igniting the darkness with violent flashes. Forks of light hit the ground like

thrown spears, almost striking his body this time.

Death would be a mercy. Not because of the pain of his wounds, but the agony of his failure.

'*Vulkan…*' Numeon's voice came out as a dry-throated rasp.

No, not Vulkan. It had been Erebus, and now his agent had fled with the fulgurite. Grammaticus, the spy. Liar. Traitor.

Another bolt earthed nearby, and Numeon grimaced. That made five since he had come round. Each belligerent strike brought the storm closer. He had no desire to see what would happen if he remained where he was when a sixth or seventh fork hit the surface.

Moving was proving difficult. A patch of spilled blood encircled his body, slowly spreading in a dark morass his enhanced physiology was impotent to staunch.

When the Emperor had created His Space Marines, He had made them hardy, but they were not indestructible. Nor were their primarchs, as some poor sons had come to know.

Numeon would refute the claims of his father's death, though.

If he lived long enough.

His chest was a mess of broken bone carapace and damaged internal organs. He drank and breathed blood, not air. Erebus's bolt pistol had seen to that. Even being blind in one eye and unable to see it at that moment, he knew his armour was more arterial-red than drake-green. Numeon's injuries, his near-paralysis, left a stark conclusion.

I am dying.

Even transhumans had limits, and Artellus Numeon had reached his. Though his mind rebelled against the prospect of his death, his physical body could not support the lie.

Another crack of lightning struck close, scorching the earth – just like the bombs and cannons that had rained death upon Isstvan V. Weakly, Numeon turned his head to track the bolt's trajectory. The flash echoed across his retina, multiplying repeatedly then fading into sharp relief before ultimately dissolving into a memory of sight. In its wake, he saw vortices of harsh grey sand scudding across the wastes of Traoris, like insubstantial djinn of old Abyssinii, carrying the reek of death and the stench of burnt earth.

Only when the vortices grew larger and became more uniform did Numeon realise it wasn't just the wind rolling off some distant and unseen sea.

It was a ship, which meant the *Fire Ark* could still be aloft, and so he dared to

hope.

During the events that followed, Numeon would learn there was precious little hope left in a galaxy at war.

A desert stretched away into the distance, endless and black. Crested with high dunes and formidable iron bulwarks, it had become a vista of devastation, thronged with the dead and dying. Some of the fallen lay half buried in blood-soaked sand. Others baked in their armour, slowly burning in the sun. The stink of putrefaction was so ripe it had attained form, a rank and physical mass that weighed heavy on the shoulders.

It was chaos on the black sand. True chaos.

Brothers slain.

Betrayal most foul.

Details of the massacre fled, as if fearful of being recalled, though they would be forever lodged in Numeon's eidetic memory. The black of the desert was usurped by the darkness of a cell, the dying screams of his brothers replaced by maddening quietude in which a thought was louder than a shell blast.

Iron shackles linked his wrists, and snaked to his ankles too. It was hardly necessary. The river of Numeon's strength had ebbed to little more than vapour.

He was naked apart from the lower half of his armour's undermesh sub-layer, the many old wounds and branding scars starkly visible. His battleplate was destroyed anyway, damaged beyond repair. The cold of his cell, the chill of the void bleeding through the bare metal, was as adverse to him as shadow was to the sun. He shivered.

Rudimentary medical work had been done to reknit his body. It healed, but would be badly scarred. At least the hole in his chest had been stitched back up. His captors had the craft for more effective surgeries; they just wanted Numeon to suffer.

He suspected it was also why they had left him the hammer.

It was a relatively simple thing. Short haft, square head, a single jewel stud set into the pommel. Crafted as a piece of ornamentation, it more accurately resembled a fuller, the preferred tool of a black-smiter.

Humble appearances often belied more esoteric significance. It was more than just a hammer. It was also a symbol.

For Numeon, now the last warden of the Pyre, it represented hope.

So grievously wounded, Numeon clung to the sigil of Vulkan as if it were his mortal thread, in the fear that if even one finger slipped then he too would be

lost.

His eye stung with the potency of *helfyre,* reminding him of that mortality and wrenching him from fanciful notions. Feeling his consciousness slipping, he chose to supplant poetry with fact, using the focus of his thoughts as an anchor.

Fenrisians had numerous words to describe snow and ice, but those who came from Nocturne, or believed in the Promethean creed, had many ways to define fire, and these terms varied across the seven realms or Sanctuary Cities.

In Hesiod, known as the Seat of Kings, it was *helfyre*. In Themis, City of Warlords, they used *urgrek*. Both were old, lyrical words for the deep magma flows at the nadir of Mount Deathfire, the bubbling heartblood of Nocturne. It was hot, promising crippling agony to any who touched it or even strayed within its stifling aura. Only the deep drakes craved its radiating warmth and the natural solitude it offered, on account of it being anathema to most other forms of life. Protean fire, as described by inhabitants of the Jewel City of Epithemus, was claimed to be the vital spark that took the souls of the dead, and the husks they had become, and restored them to the world, albeit changed and renewed. Such beliefs persisted in Skarokk, called the Dragonspine, and Aethonion, the Fire Spike, but each realm used a different word, *protan* and *morphean* respectively.

Fabrikarr, as it was referred to in the Merchant's Sprawl of Clymene, was the forgesmith's flame, the heart heat that tempers metal, the mundane creator. In the Beacon City of Heliosa it was *ferrun*.

Immolus was the world-ender, and all seven cities uttered it the same and often in hushed whispers. For it was the unbound flame, and had been a part of Nocturnean creation myth since before the fabled days of the first Igniax and the metal-shapers of old.

Numeon knew all their names and every variation across every city, just as he knew the names of countless others and he clung to them as he clung to the fuller's haft, separating purpose from agony so that he might rise and live.

Live…

Not for himself, but for an errant father whom Numeon believed in above all else. His faith – not the tawdry ephemeral faith associated with religion, but the true and honest conviction that something was real in spite of empirical evidence – was the vital force flowing through his veins and the eternal fire igniting his mind. His belief manifested as a simple fact. Two words.

Vulkan lives.

The dull grinding of gears brought Numeon out of his deepening torpor. His cell door opened, admitting a thin shaft of light into the darkness that widened as

the door climbed and slowly disappeared into an aperture in the ceiling.

A figure stood silhouetted in the light. His form was power-armoured, further bulking out his broad and formidable transhuman frame. Oath papers bedecked his torso and shoulders like a contagion, but Numeon took care to lower his eyes from what was scrawled upon each strip of flesh-parchment. They were damning words, borne by those who had turned from the Emperor's enlightenment and embraced old gods. Such things used to be mocked as stories of overactive imaginations.

No one did so any more.

Numeon gripped the sigil tighter and tried to stand. He got as far as one knee before his defiance was overruled by his fatigue.

Shaking his head, the figure outlined in silhouette tutted.

'Still weak.' It was less a question, more an observation. 'Where is that fabled endurance, son of Nocturne?' asked Xenut Sul. His voice was sibilant but possessed a richness at odds with his rasping cadence.

Xenut Sul had introduced himself soon after Numeon was taken and had awoken aboard the Word Bearers ship. He had seemed a peculiarly ordinary legionary at first, with close-cropped fair hair, and an oddly symmetrical face with Colchisian runes etched down both right and left aspect. It was as if he wore the face of every man and no man at the same time. His eyes were youthful, yet captured a sense of fathomless experience only seen in veterans. In the six weeks since he had been taken captive, Numeon had failed to divine Xenut Sul's origin, a fact that amused his captor greatly.

'Why has your father's strength deserted you when you need it the most, hmm?' Xenut Sul taunted.

Numeon replied by gritting his teeth, glowering through his one good eye.

The light stretched further into the cell, bathing Numeon in an ugly yellow glow that gave his skin a sickly pallor.

'Your wounds look improved,' muttered Xenut Sul. He crouched down onto his haunches, seizing Numeon's chin. A pained grimace twisted the Salamander's face as the Word Bearer's armoured fingers bit into flesh.

'I wonder, son of Nocturne,' he said, 'are you ready to speak?'

Xenut Sul's warm smile but cold eyes confronted Numeon. It was an expression he had come to know well, along with the traitor's inherent lack of mercy and predilection for inflicting pain.

'I hurt you because you ask me to, son of Nocturne.'

It was as if he had cored out Numeon's mind as well as his badly stitched flesh.

‘Do you remember the question?’ Xenut Sul asked, incrementally increasing the pressure on Numeon’s chin. ‘The fulgurite… where is it?’

Numeon made no sound beyond the wheezing of breath sawing in and out of his lungs.

‘Tell me,’ said Xenut Sul, ‘what do you know of Barthusa Narek?’

Still the Salamander gave no answer.

Xenut Sul smiled a second time, his expression pitying.

‘Are you really asking me to do it again?’

He lowered his head, resigned. When he faced Numeon once more, his eyes were dark, abyssal pits. The richness in his tone became a resonance, as if one voice overlapped another and they were speaking fractionally out of synch.

‘I serve…’ he said, and inclined his head, ‘…you serve.’ He nodded at Numeon. ‘One of us is going to disappoint his master. It won’t be me, son of Nocturne.’

Now Numeon grinned, exposing red-rimed teeth.

‘Something amuses you?’ Xenut Sul asked.

Numeon kept grinning. To a casual observer, it would have looked insane.

‘You wish to speak?’

Numeon nodded slowly.

‘Then give me your words and all of this can end.’

Letting go of the prisoner’s chin, Xenut Sul stood up and stepped back.

It took Numeon a few precious moments to marshal his strength. He wanted this utterance to have import. He wanted his gaoler to remember.

This time he rose to his feet, and though he shook and trembled with the effort, he did not fall.

Eyes wide, glaring with defiance, Numeon roared.

‘Vulkan lives!’

Xenut Sul lashed out savagely, driving the air from Numeon’s lungs with a heavy punch and flooring him. The gaoler crouched back down.

‘You are weak because your father is dead. You just don’t have the wit to see it.’ Something barbed and metallic flashed in Xenut Sul’s hand. ‘I will show you…’

TWO

‘Red-marked’

Gladius-class cruiser, Dark Sacrament

The cruiser *Dark Sacrament* was burning.

It listed painfully in the void, gas and particulate spewing from its vast arteries like blood.

Maritime sailors, those of the deep oceans of Old Earth, from the age when Terra still had natural seas, had often likened their great seafaring vessels to beasts. They invested them with spirit to imbue the wood and steel of their construction with will and presence. In times of dire need, during a storm or when imperilled by some leviathan of the depths, these mariners would call upon that spirit to rescue them, beseech it to deliver their crews from death one last time.

To those able to observe its demise, the *Dark Sacrament* appeared very much like a beast, but in its death throes it was impotent to save those aboard, no matter how desperately they pleaded.

Scars riddled the ancient carapace of its armoured flanks, and entire plates of adamantium flaked away like shed scales. Exposed beneath it, a vulnerable layer of ‘flesh’ flared with ephemeral fires that died almost as soon as they were born, hungrily devouring the scant oxygen that remained inside the ruptured ship.

Upon the beast’s back, the immense cathedrals along its spine had collapsed and fragmented, releasing chunks of iconoclastic statuary into the starless depths of space, where they drifted without anchor.

The deep wound that scored the ventral hull had been the decisive blow, destroying most of its enginarium in a single, precise strike. The ship’s open belly had bled flash-frozen corpses into the void moments after it was sundered.

Some of the dead wore the crimson battleplate of traitors. Their bodies were riddled with las-burns too. They drifted still, forgotten amongst the other debris.

Its shields had failed next, another surgically executed strike intended to weaken and cripple, not kill.

Along the lateral aspect, starboard side, a cluster of deep impacts had cored through the flaking armour plate. A Caestus assault ram had reached a terminus at the end of each one, clinging doggedly to the *Dark Sacrament*'s brutalised flank.

Despite the destruction wrought against it, the vital cuts debilitating the cruiser, it was here in the comparatively diminutive boarding craft that the mortal blow fell. Deadly cargo, Ultramarines of the 'Red-marked', had been harboured within and their minds were bent on vengeance.

Inviglio ran the length of the ventral access corridor, keeping one eye on the rad-counter glowing on his left helmet lens. He was headed towards the ship's aft, lower decks, where the warp engines were situated.

'Naevius.'

Breathing hard, Inviglio reached the first transverse junction of the corridor. They needed to push ahead, advance quickly and violently before reinforcements could be mustered. But beyond the junction, the ship's illumination and vital support systems had failed. Gravity lingered tenuously, negating the need for mag-lock to the deck underfoot, but visibility was poor.

Inviglio had already lost Drusus to one of Angron's butchers lurking in the shadows. He had no desire to lose another, and would even risk his commander's ire at this abrupt lack of urgency.

Naevius arrived seconds after being summoned, a bio-scanner in hand, seeking potential threats. Like the rest of the legionaries in his squad, he wore a stripe of red paint down his faceplate, perpendicular to his armoured shoulders.

'Reading four hostile contacts,' muttered Naevius in the deep baritone of Iax.

Inviglio hailed from Konor but adopted no airs or graces with his Iaxian brother. War and the pragmatic tutelage of the commander had seen to that.

The brutal assault on Ultramar had levelled all hierarchies and preconceptions of nobility. Solidarity had come in its wake, a desire in all Ultramarians, transhuman and otherwise, to stand together and take back what had once been theirs.

Officially, the war was won in Ultramar, after the Five Hundred Worlds had suffered at the hands of the XVII and XII Legions before Guilliman and the XIII had managed to turn back the tide, but these legionaries knew different. They

knew that beyond the immediate auspices of Macragge and the aegis the presence of the primus worlds provided, Imperium Secundus still suffered.

Nodding to Naevius, Inviglio tapped the comm-bead embedded in his gorget.

'Leargus, take vanguard position. Naevius and I will flank. Bracheus, hold rearguard.'

A string of rapid affirmatives flashed as icons across Inviglio's retinal feed and they were ready to proceed.

Leargus came up from behind, hefting a snub-nosed grav-gun, which he kept at waist height.

'Easy does it, brother,' whispered Inviglio, earning a curt nod of acknowledgement from Leargus as he led the three Ultramarines forwards. 'We don't know precisely what's out there.'

More than once during the recent patrols, they had raided vessels crewed by Unburdened. Daemon hunting had become close to second nature to the XIII now, but that didn't make these creatures any less dangerous. The rules of engagement had changed, and either the sons of Guilliman would adapt or they would die.

Inviglio was determined it would be the former rather than the latter. In this instance, caution was less a luxury and more an imperative.

Their first warning came a quarter of the way down the corridor in a broad maintenance section, articulated in the flash of arterial-red against Leargus's armour. The legionary reacted fast, swivelling to trigger a burst of hyper-dense gravity from his weapon. Part of the corridor's superstructure bent and split as if being crushed. One of the murderous XII caught in the gravity field took the hit too, and his plastron and left pauldron buckled inwards. It didn't stop him hurling his chainaxe, which spun end over end before embedding itself in Leargus's upper right torso.

The other renegades lying in wait echoed the roar spat through Leargus's vox-grille, only their cries were murderous, not agonised.

Three warriors clad in legionary plate came at the Ultramarines strike team. Two wore the grubby, battle-tarnished white and blue of the World Eaters. The other hailed from the XVII, but was no ordinary Word Bearer.

Hunchbacked, its grotesque musculature throbbed inside battleplate straining to contain it. A helm alloyed with a daemonic visage to the point at which determining where one ended and the other began was impossible. It needed no bolter or blade, the unnatural attributes of claw and fang more than adequate to its needs.

Leargus summed up the damned creature succinctly, declaring, ‘Abomination!’

Despite the chainaxe lodged in his chest, the legionary had enough cogency remaining to aim his second shot at the Unburdened, but it shrugged off the graviton burst as though it were a mere irritation and sprang off its cloven hooves at the Ultramarine.

Inviglio had only fought an Unburdened once before. During that encounter, the Sergeant had been leading them and he had taken the beast apart with the blade of an energised longsword.

Old foes, old weapons. Inviglio remembered the lesson, as he watched poor Leargus split from crown to groin, his armour parting sinister and dexter like parchment. Bracheus was coming to reinforce him, but with the rest of his brothers engaging their own targets, Inviglio was alone when he faced the monster that had just carved up Leargus.

He drew his gladius. With one press of the activation stud in the hilt, he ignited the power field that crackled along its edge and faced down the Unburdened.

Via the retinal display in his helmet, Inviglio saw Bracheus split the skull of the XII Legion warrior wounded by the grav-gun. Naevius fired off snap shots with his bolt pistol at the second World Eaters legionary, but drew his power sword once at close quarters.

Inviglio’s sight then shrank myopically as the Unburdened shouldered Leargus’s steaming corpse aside and found the Ultramarine standing defiantly.

No words would do justice, so Inviglio cried out wrathfully as he thrust his blade at the beast. It was like striking the adamantium hull plates of a Stormbird, and the blow resonated painfully back down the blade, jarring his shoulder.

The Unburdened’s riposte was savage, a backhand that lifted Inviglio off his feet and had him hurrying to roll away as a second overhand blow cleaved into the deck where he had been lying.

He had barely got to his feet when the beast swung again, a slicing transverse like a sword-cut that Inviglio had to parry with the flat of his gladius or be bisected. Metal shrieked against metal as his booted feet skidded against the deck, throwing up friction sparks.

It was tough to get moving. He needed to be faster, but the slowly diminishing gravity from the vessel’s dying life-support systems dragged on his limbs with the growing presence of inertia.

A blur of motion flashed on Inviglio’s right, and through a hazing visual feed he saw Bracheus slam an axe-head into the Unburdened’s flank. It bellowed, so loud it stunned Inviglio’s audio feed and briefly overloaded the dampeners built

into his helm.

Recognising this chance to claim a much-needed advantage, Inviglio aimed a thrust up at the beast's neck. As he wrenched the blade free, a fount of dark fluid spurted out with it. Even through his rebreather the stench was vile, but the howl of agony from the Unburdened was even more disconcerting.

It wasn't the deep and guttural bellow of a wounded beast; it was the shrill shouts of tortured innocents, the dying cries of infants and their mothers. It was the death scream of Ultramarians, butchered in the thousands during the invasion.

Bracheus lashed out again, severing wrist from arm. About to turn, the Unburdened jerked spasmodically before the crackling point of Naevius's sword emerged through its chest from its back. The corridor stank of sudden putrefaction as old blood burnt and cauterised.

Inviglio knew that they could not relent. Already, the Unburdened's wounds were knitting together as the daemonic passenger wearing the skin of its willing legionary host drew on the power of the warp. As the beast fell to one knee, Inviglio cleaved down with his blade, piercing armour and striking clavicle bone before he began to carve.

Bracheus hacked, wrenched his axe-head loose then hacked again as if felling an Iaxian harrowing tree. Ichorous blood flecked his armour, hissing as the mild acid scorched paint and pitted the battleplate.

Holding his sword two-handed, in a downward grip, Naevius emerged from the other side of the Unburdened, stabbing unceasingly with metronomic regularity.

In a few more seconds it was over, and the dismembered remains of the Unburdened lay sloughed at the Ultramarines' feet. As the entity bled back into the hell realm that had spawned it, the host shrank and withered until nothing but a miasma of gore and chunks of sundered plate and bone was left of it.

Inviglio gestured to Naevius. 'Tell me we're clear, brother.'

Sheathing his sword, Naevius checked the hand-held scanner and nodded.

'Clear.'

Once through the ventral corridor, they would reach the warp engines.

Even without Drusus and Leargus, they would have enough charges between them to inflict critical damage on the ship. A catastrophic explosion would result. Nonetheless, Inviglio instructed Bracheus to gather their fallen brother's incendiaries. He wished there was enough time to speak some appropriate words over Leargus's corpse. They had survived the first battle of Calth together, bled in the subterranean arcologies that were, even now, being contested. To die in the

confines of some thrice-cursed starship did not seem fitting, nor did the fact Leargus's gene-seed would remain unharvested.

'Is that the last of them, do you think?' asked Naevius, even though his auspex threw up only negative returns with every fresh scan.

Inviglio slammed his gauntlet against the side of his helm, encouraging the comms to come back online. It worked, and he was about to answer Naevius when the vox-link crackled loudly in his ear.

'*Status, brother.*'

It was the Sergeant. It never failed to surprise Inviglio, the versatility in that voice, which could so easily be turned to command or good-natured bonhomie. Not unlike the warrior himself, who was as adaptable an Ultramarine as Inviglio had ever known or had the privilege to serve with. It was part of the reason why he had left Calth, and how he had come to be amongst the Red-marked.

'Closing on objective now.'

'*Casualties?*'

'Two, Drusus and Leargus.'

The Sergeant swore under his breath. There was a momentary pause before he replied. '*Munitions deck is cleansed and secured. Charges set. We await your word, brother. Give it quickly, though. Another ship has appeared on augury.*'

'We go to intercept?'

'*With all haste.*' He cut the link.

Bracheus returned with Leargus's charges and held them out to the others.

'Enough to take down three cruisers,' he remarked.

Inviglio nodded, silently applauding Bracheus's aggression. 'No need for overkill. We only need to take down one.'

THREE

Vigil

Magna Macragge Civitas, Vault of the Unbound Flame

Funerary rites varied greatly across even the largely homogenised Imperium of the Great Crusade. Despite a growing galactic zeitgeist towards enlightenment, many human cultures still ritualised the passing of the dead.

During the days of Old Earth, the Terra that existed before Unity, the Romanii practised inhumation, whilst most Nordafrikans preferred cremation. The old customs of the Aegyptos demanded embalming as a way for their departed to enter the underworld, whilst the peoples of ancient Himalazia embraced the ostensibly barbaric rite of *jhator,* or ritual dissection.

Nocturnean belief held that all things which come from earth must then return to it. Only then could the circle of rebirth be forged. It referred to immolation by flame – flesh, bone and ash.

For the XVIII, fire was both baptismal and funerary; thus the Promethean creed as taught by Vulkan could be preserved. This, and so much more besides, was a part of his legacy now and must be protected.

So it was with bitter regret that Barek Zytos knelt before the casket in which the Lord of Drakes was now entombed.

'He belongs with the earth,' uttered a solemn voice from the shadows of the deep vault. 'Not in this cold and gilded barrow.'

A single memorial flame alleviated the darkness, fluttering mournfully. Its lambent light caught the edges of Vulkan's golden tomb, whilst limning the grieving features of Zytos.

'A primarch held in state beneath the Fortress of Hera…' Zytos murmured to the newcomer, his grief making him pause. 'It is almost beyond countenance.'

He had declared to Lord Guilliman his belief in Vulkan's survival, defiant against any who would dare gainsay it. The bitter irony was their father *had* survived the Dropsite Massacre, only to be murdered by an assassin whilst purportedly on friendly soil.

Loyalty was air and sustenance to Zytos – he could not eschew it any more than he could willingly stop breathing or eating – but the fate of Vulkan, and what he saw as the deception of Macragge, had wounded him deeply.

'Let us hope he is the only one,' said the other figure in the vault as he knelt beside Zytos.

'Why are we still here, Var'kir?' Zytos asked.

Phaestus Var'kir did not answer immediately. He took a moment to bow respectfully to his primarch in state, and muttered a few words of Promethean ritual.

'How do you propose we leave, Zytos?' he asked, his cadence reminiscent of cracking parchment. 'The Lord of Macragge forbids it whilst the Ruinstorm remains.'

'I find that an overly lyrical and unnecessarily calamitous word for it.'

'What? *Ruin?*' Var'kir replied.

Unlike Zytos, who wore the drake-green of the Salamanders, Var'kir was entirely clad in black. As a devotee of the Chaplaincy, it was his duty. He had often reminded Zytos, it was not because he was in mourning but on account of his calling, one needed more than ever in such tenebrous days.

A wound not just of the flesh but of the spirit had been inflicted upon the nascent Imperium, provoking a theological war of the soul.

'It has brought us to our knees,' Var'kir admitted, 'for a time, at least.'

Zytos respected the sanctity of the chamber, even with all of its hollow opulence, but still transmitted the futile anger in his words.

'How can we now rise? Our father came to a Legion approaching self-annihilation. Without his influence, how can we hope to avoid such a fate again?'

The legionary had a stern countenance and the broad shoulders of a Themian. His deep crimson hair was cut short and on both hemispheres of his skull iconic representations of drakes were shaved into the scalp.

Gently, Var'kir laid a gauntleted hand upon Zytos's shoulder.

'With his influence are we made protean, brother.' He smiled warmly, despite their bleak surroundings. 'We are much changed from the Dragon Warriors we used to be.'

Few in the Legion knew, let alone spoke, the XVIII's old cognomen. To do so prompted a reminder of the great shame it signified, of the days before Vulkan had taught them pragmatism to temper their self-sacrificial natures and humanity to counter their abyssal anger.

Var'kir was badly scarred. The latter part of his name, *kir,* meant 'chosen'. In Var'kir's case, it was an apt honorific. As one of Lord Rhy'tan's 'Voices of Fire', he had been sent to minister to the legionaries about to bring Horus the Renegade to heel, but scarcely survived the massacre. The stunted, ash-white crest bifurcating his hairless scalp suggested veteran, as did the closeness of his flesh to the skull. His eyes still held their Nocturnean fire, though, embers to the coal-black of his skin.

A moment of pensive silence fell before Zytos said, 'I thought I heard it beat. His heart.'

As one, the eyes of the two Salamanders turned to regard their slain lord.

Vulkan lay in silent repose. His eyes were closed and he looked serene behind the casket glass. He was, as he always had been, their father. Honour scars marked his face, branded into flesh by an iron rod. Hard to discern, except in a certain light, they described the legacy of Vulkan's deeds.

'Our minds can sometimes trick us into believing what our hearts desire, Zytos,' Var'kir replied quietly. 'It is well, at least, he is here to be mourned by his sons, instead of defiled on some distant battlefield.'

Zytos lowered his gaze, unable to look upon his dead father any longer.

Clenched in Vulkan's fist was *Dawnbringer,* an artefact of peerless craftsmanship, wrought by the Lord of Drakes himself, and the very hammer that had spirited him across the empyrean to Macragge.

Aside from his flesh and bone, it was the only thing that had survived atmospheric re-entry intact. In point of fact Vulkan wore not his draconian battleplate, but was instead clad in a suit of armour from Lord Guilliman's vault. At least it had been crafted with the livery of the XVIII.

Zytos and the other Salamanders who had made it to Macragge knew fragments of the story surrounding Vulkan's violent arrival. Some aspects of it beggared belief to the sons of Nocturne, incredulous accounts of miraculous resurrection and healing, and a madness that rendered the Lord of Drakes into a frenzied beast.

Rumours, nothing more. The former was cruel, giving hope where none existed, and the latter was an insult to Vulkan's memory. Both Zytos and Var'kir had refuted them.

‘Has anyone else tried to remove it?’ The sound of Var’kir’s voice lifted Zytos from bleak reverie. The Chaplain’s hand wavered in front of him, held before the glass and hovering, fingers outstretched towards where the ugly spearhead jutted from the primarch’s chest. His gauntleted hand trembled at the horror of it, the abject violation. To see it was a constant reminder of Vulkan’s murder and the crude tool used to end him.

‘Some,’ said Zytos, a tacit admission in the tone of his answer that he could be counted amongst them, ‘but all who have tried, failed.’

‘None can,’ said Var’kir, tracing the words engraved upon the casket’s only ornamentation, a gilded scroll, with his fingers. ‘*Unbound Flame…*’ he whispered, reading the words aloud. His eyes strayed to the memorial flame.

Var’kir was gifted. Like the Igniax of old, he perceived truth and wisdom in flames.

Zytos had followed his gaze. In spite of his grief, his voice still betrayed a sliver of hope.

‘What do you see?’

After staring for a few minutes, Var’kir shook his head.

‘Nothing,’ he murmured, regretful.

‘I would gladly sacrifice my life,’ declared Zytos, unashamed of the tears streaking down his face.

‘There are none amongst us who would not do so, brother.’

The ancient Promethean creed told that the circle of death and rebirth not only maintained the balance of nature, but also held the belief of life eternal, of resurrection. Within the Legion, this had been accepted as the harvesting of gene-seed passing on from one host into another, so a warrior’s legacy might live on, but Zytos referred to a more literal interpretation. The sacrifice of one could bring about the apotheosis of another. It was foolish and sentimental; pragmatism was needed now. But grief had to be properly observed first.

‘Father,’ said Zytos, a fierce strength inflecting his voice, ‘we have great need of hope. Please…’

He bowed his head, and Var’kir joined him in grave memoriam.

FOUR

The Preacher

Pain woke Numeon.

His treatment at the hands of Xenut Sul had been severe enough to render him unconscious. His first thought was of the fresh stitches in his side, the crude sutures in his chest and back. His second thought was the realisation he was no longer in his cell.

A smell pervaded, faintly reminiscent of a slaughterhouse, though Numeon had learned to be suspicious of his senses in this place. Old friends, almost certainly dead, had come to him in his barely lucid moments, Leodrakk and Pergellen staring with ghoulish faces, their flesh sunken and putrefying. The stink of their rotting corpses, somehow animate and enslaved to hunger, had been so convincing that Numeon had almost believed they were real.

Awaking in a feverish sweat, only to collapse in exhaustion a moment later, he had been sorely glad they were not.

Dead is dead, and nothing could alter that.

'Being able to distinguish phantoms from what is real will serve you well here,' the Preacher said to Numeon, regarding him with the same detached interest a biologis adept might regard an insect.

A cavernous yet claustrophobic chamber surrounded Numeon. Xenut Sul had gone, replaced by his new tormentor. And though it appeared as if they were alone, Numeon's instincts warned him of the opposite.

He heard… *murmurings.* Though he knew he could not rely upon anything he saw or heard, the voices sounded pained. They were also reminiscent of warriors he had fought beside before, not specifically but certainly of the same caste.

What is this fell place? he wondered.

About to speak the question aloud, he stopped when he realised he was bound hand and foot to a slab, and that the sigil was gone. Briefly, he glanced around for it but saw nothing save the blackness of the chamber and the Preacher before him.

His interrogator paced a short arc, his eyes constantly scrutinising the prisoner.

'The hammer…' Numeon said at last, despising himself for the weakness in his voice. 'Where is it?'

'It speaks,' said the Preacher, ignoring his question, as calmly and conversationally as if they were two strangers just getting acquainted. 'Xenut Sul said you would not speak to him. Will you speak to me then, Artellus Numeon of Vulkan's honoured Pyre Guard?'

Numeon bared his teeth but didn't bother to strain against his bonds. It was a petty act of defiance, but the only one he had left.

The Preacher gave no reaction. He was tall with transhuman physiology and wore long crimson robes, etched in Colchisian. His bald pate and face seemed strangely patterned, as if dark, tanned, until the Preacher drew close and Numeon saw the umber cuneiform marking his skin.

'You're a Word Bearer,' spat Numeon.

'So you will speak to me. Even if it is to state the obvious.'

The Preacher bowed reverently.

'You're a traitor,' the Salamander accused.

A slight tremor below the right eye betrayed the Preacher's annoyance.

'Loyalty is just a matter of perspective, Artellus. Yours is merely different to mine.'

'Is this your tactic now?' asked Numeon, his eyes still searching the chamber for the sigil but finding only shadow. He heard the faint susurration of laboured breathing. 'Am I to sympathise with betrayers and murderers? By seeing from your *perspective* will I give up what you want to know?'

The Preacher laced his fingers and held his hands just above the abdomen.

'I know everything you know, Artellus.'

Numeon failed to mask his surprise. The reek of the charnel pit returned, and a sickening suspicion began to form as to both the chamber's purpose and its inhabitants.

The Preacher frowned. 'Did you think you were brought here to bargain? To resist another round of torture?' He laughed curtly. 'Xenut Sul's task was not the extraction of information – he merely wished to hurt you. That was *my*

bargain… with him. Do you see?'

Numeon did not, but he was weak and only half conscious. He could not even be certain he was awake and hunted the shadows for the spectres of his lost comrades. None manifested.

'A mind as untrained as yours, however strong, is no barrier to a Dark Apostle,' the Preacher said without pride. 'Yes, I seek Barthusa Narek. He is a true renegade and shall be hunted to the ends of the galaxy for what he's done.'

Numeon remembered the Word Bearers marksman, but had not known his Legion considered him a betrayer.

'So,' said the Preacher, 'I have given you something and now you must provide something in return.'

Numeon scoffed. 'You are deluded.'

A thin smile gave the Preacher a sinister aspect.

'I know you will because it will cost you nothing. Remember, I have reached inside your mind already. I know what you know, just as I am aware of the attachment you have to that scrap of your dead primarch's armour.'

'Vulkan li–'

'Yes,' the Preacher's interruption cut Numeon's declaration short, 'so you keep saying, all evidence to the contrary.'

He licked his lips in the manner of someone accustomed to speaking at length.

'I am a believer too, as devoted to my faith as you are to your absent father. We have fallen from grace,' he said, 'all of us. For a time, not even a heartbeat in the endless saga of the cosmos, we turned our faces from the true gods and embraced a lie.' The Preacher nodded to Numeon. 'Your Emperor…' then touched a hand to his chest, '…my former Emperor. And now we are being punished for it. This war is not about the exhortation of religion, it is not for the dominance and subjugation of our species. Our souls are at stake – this is our penance for the sin of unbelief.'

Numeon scowled, already tired of the Preacher's rhetoric and willing Xenut Sul to return. 'What do you want?'

'To tell me what it was like.'

'I am still no wiser, traitor.'

The Preacher's eyes flashed with fervent desire.

'The fulgurite, the stone spear invested with the Emperor's power on earth.'

'It was…' Numeon cast his mind back to his first meeting with the man who called himself John Grammaticus, how he had described the spear and what it purportedly represented, '…unremarkable.'

Truthfully, he had barely seen it, but could gain a small victory in the torment of his interrogator.

'Amusing,' said the Preacher, turning his back.

'It is a piece of cold stone.'

'It is far more than that, I think.'

Were he able, Numeon would have shrugged, but his bonds were tight. 'Why do you even care? I thought you said the Emperor's power was a lie.'

The Preacher faced him. 'His creed, not His power. I want it because it killed the immortal primarch, and turned one of our own against us. No cold stone can do that.'

Numeon's eyes widened. 'Killed?'

The Preacher nodded slowly.

'You lie,' Numeon sneered, eyes narrowing. 'Vulkan lives,' he declared with fierce anger, 'and nothing you say will convince me otherwise, so you might as well just kill–'

The chamber trembled. Numeon felt the tremor resonate through the slab.

For a few seconds, the Preacher glanced over his shoulder as if speaking to someone standing just behind him. Numeon tried but failed to discern his exact words. Whatever was said, the Preacher looked perturbed.

'What's happening?' Numeon demanded. 'Who are you?'

As the Preacher looked back, his form flickered as a second, corporeal figure walked through it and disengaged the hololith. Numeon had been speaking to the simulacrum of the Preacher, but Xenut Sul was very real as he advanced upon him.

In a violent flare of magnesium-white, the lights in the chamber came on. After the hard metal shunt of phosphor strips engaging, Numeon took a few seconds to adjust. What he saw confirmed made him cry out in rage and anguish.

'My brothers!'

Row upon row of metal slabs, arrayed close together like ranks and files in battle, almost filled the chamber. In another light, it might have resembled an apothecarion but that would have been a lie.

Blood and death drenched this place, far from imagined and very real. Legionaries of the XIX, X and XVIII lay strapped down to the slabs and, like Numeon, they had been beaten grievously.

'What is this?' he roared, finding strength in his anger and tearing one of his bonds loose.

Xenut Sul answered curtly. 'Torture room. Have no fear, Salamander, yours is

only just beginning.’

Dagger-sharp pain flared in Numeon’s jaw. Black shadows crept over the edge of his sight. Xenut Sul disappeared behind a cloud of darkness. Before he passed out, Numeon heard the Word Bearer shouting orders.

‘All hands, repel boarders.’ The Word Bearer sounded calm, as if he had expected this. ‘They have found us. Kill any Ultramarine who sets foot aboard this ship.’

The words faded, swallowed by unconsciousness, and as he fell into the blessed abyss, Numeon was left with the drone of klaxons and the thud of booted feet…

FIVE

Liberators

Hunter-class destroyer Demagogue*, Ultramar*

The bulkhead slammed hard against the deck, raising a loud clamour. Its burnt edges glowed solar-red before fading to embers then dull black metal. Through the ragged aperture, Inviglio led a strike squad of the Red-marked.

Ahead, the narrow corridor section was dark. During ingress onto the Word Bearers ship, the Ultramarines had neutralised its primary power. Auxiliary did not stretch this far, so they were advancing through the dingy access tunnels as intended.

The *Demagogue* was a much smaller ship than the *Dark Sacrament,* a destroyer-class vessel with fewer crew. It could have easily been missed; Inviglio still had no idea how the shipmistress aboard the *Defiance of Calth* had found it. Despite its size, though, it was still teeming with traitors.

Bracheus saw them first. 'Contacts!'

The Ultramarine engaged, firing off a short staccato burst from his bolter. Muffled shouts followed, the pair of enemy combatants lit up briefly by Bracheus's muzzle flare before the flash died and so did they.

'Two kills,' he barked, ejecting a spent clip before *chanking* a swift reload into the empty breech.

'Advancing,' stated Inviglio, darting forwards with his body crouched low to present a smaller target.

Naevius had one eye on the auspex and cried out a warning just as the shell storm erupted in front of them.

Bolter rounds struck around the Ultramarines like hot, brass rain. Inviglio took a glancing hit against his shoulder guard and felt his lower leg greave dent with a

non-penetrating impact hit before he hugged the wall of the corridor.

The others had done the same: Bracheus, Gordianius and Petronius on the left; he and Naevius on the right.

The two traitors Bracheus had executed were bait, intended to draw the Ultramarines into a narrow bottleneck.

Inwardly, Inviglio cursed his stupidity and briefly considered he might be reaching his physical limits, the point at which his mission efficacy would begin to diminish.

'Petronius,' he uttered through the vox, 'give us some cover.' Through the shared retinal feed, Inviglio icon-lit Petronius's strike point.

The burly Ultramarine stepped out from behind the narrow rib-struts where the squad were hunkered down and fed a rapid burst from his meltagun into the cabling and armour plating above. He took a bolt-round in the upper torso for his efforts, and the mass-reactive shell shattered bone and almost tore off his shoulder.

Bracheus and Gordianius dragged the wounded legionary clear. A second later and a chunk of upper deckplate, cabling, pipes and adamantium rebar came crashing down into the corridor section.

Inviglio and the others took up positions behind the improvised barricades, able to adopt a better line of fire and bring their full strength to bear. Even Petronius joined the barrage, hooking the meltagun into a makeshift firing lip and unleashing sustained pulses of focused electromagnetic radiation.

It was over quickly, the three ambushers no match for the expertly trained Ultramarines.

Bracheus kicked through the debris they had used for cover, whilst Inviglio quickly stabilised Petronius so he could fight one-handed.

'Re-equip,' ordered the squad leader, prompting Gordianius and Petronius to change weapons.

Once he had rearmed Petronius with a bolt pistol, Inviglio clapped the hulking Ultramarine on the shoulder. 'Ready.'

Petronius nodded and they swiftly moved out.

The Red-marked were picking their way through the three Word Bearers corpses when Inviglio's vox crackled in his ear. Inside his sealed helm, the return was strangely neutral and bereft of any ambient noise.

'Sergeant,' he said, recognising the Sergeant's ident as it flashed up on his retinal display. Crouched down, Inviglio raised his clenched fist as a signal to the others to stop.

‘*Change to mission parameters,*’ the Sergeant replied. In the background, Inviglio could hear the sound of bolter fire and the angry growl of chain weapons.

‘Go ahead.’

At Inviglio’s next silent order, the squad assumed a defensive perimeter.

Overhead, klaxons sounded and the crimson light of emergency lamps tainted the gloom the hue of blood.

‘*Primary is inloading to your retinal display,*’ the Sergeant said as fresh coordinates and vessel schematics resolved on Inviglio’s left lens corner.

‘Interrogative,’ said Inviglio.

‘*Go ahead,*’ the Sergeant answered calmly despite the fierce firefight he was obviously embroiled in.

‘Apothecarion? Do we have wounded friendlies on board?’

‘*Negative. Theoretical is prisoners.*’ He paused a beat. ‘*The Word Bearers are not patching them up, Vitus.*’

‘Understood,’ said Inviglio. He had known the Sergeant for a long time, but still could not get used to his informal habit of occasionally using first names. The implication was obvious, though.

‘*Make it quick,*’ said the Sergeant just before cutting the link. ‘*We’re drawing a lot of fire.*’

‘Updated mission parameters,’ Inviglio told the others as they were moving again. ‘Theoretical – high probability of friendlies on board vessel.’

‘Practical, brother?’ asked Bracheus.

Inviglio briefly met his gaze, answering firmly, ‘We get them off this ship then send it screaming back to hell.’

Shouts echoed down from the next turn ahead.

As much as Inviglio wanted to take the fight to the Word Bearers, he had his orders.

‘Junction left,’ he said, leading the others away from the conflict and towards the apothecarion. He looked down to his left at Naevius’s auspex scanner. Dark green bio-readings had just filled the screen with a profusion of contact blips. ‘With all haste, brothers.’

He could not have been out for more than a few minutes, but by the time Numeon came around again Xenut Sul was gone.

Knowing it was unlikely that he could save the other prisoners, Numeon had to think pragmatically instead.

One wrist already freed, Numeon reached over and unclasped the other. They were simple leather straps, easy enough to remove, but his fingers were numb so it took several minutes.

Removing the ankle restraints was harder, and he kept one eye on the entrance to the abattoir throughout, trying not to imagine the horrors perpetrated within its grimy, bone-yellow confines.

Anger would not serve him here; Numeon knew he must keep a cool head. He also needed information. Something had happened on board the ship. A prisoner revolt, perhaps? His might not be the only chamber where they were keeping legionaries still loyal to the Throne.

He dared to hope K'gosi or one of the others, even his Pyre brother Leodrakk, might have survived and be aboard the ship, but quickly crushed the idea. He *had* seen his brothers already, in his waking nightmares. They were revenants of memory, spectres who would only be banished when Numeon broke free of this dungeon and took revenge on their killers.

The last ankle strap came loose, and Numeon had to drag himself off the slab. He fell hard onto his knees, almost hitting the next table. The dull pain of his recent inactivity and torture had drained his body. Teeth gritted, he found the edge of the adjacent slab and hauled himself up.

Numeon flinched as he felt a cold hand strongly grip his fingers, and looked down to see the bloody face of an Iron Hands legionary. Numeon's fall must have woken him. The X legionary's bionics had all been ripped out, so only a red-raw void remained. His legs had effectively been amputated and the dying son of Medusa stared wildly. Below his missing right eye there was the tattoo of a skull.

Overhead, the lights were flickering as auxiliary power was fed to other more essential systems on the ship.

It must be an attack, thought Numeon.

The flickering glow of the phosphor lamps cast ghoulish shadows about the legionary's ravaged face.

'Don't… lose… hope…' he rasped haltingly, a lingering mote of his bionics lending a mechanistic tone to his voice.

Like a dying machine, thought Numeon, *all of us left to bleed like carrion in the sun,* as deep-seated grief threatened to surface.

The Iron Hands legionary gripped harder. Two fingers of his right hand were missing. The other wrist was a stump.

'Kill them… for us,' he snarled, wide-eyed.

‘I will,’ Numeon murmured grimly. He drew back his fist, voicing a sharp cry of anguish as he punched through the legionary’s abused ribcage to destroy his heart and end his suffering.

Others were deserving of mercy, but Numeon had no time. A faint draught, the acerbic reek of cordite, wafted through a crack in the chamber. Xenut Sul had left it unsealed. Whether out of carelessness or as part of some crueller ploy, it didn’t matter.

Numeon staggered for the door, finding inner strength returning with every step.

Outside, the ship seemed vast and oppressive after such a long time incarcerated, but he adapted quickly. He realised the vessel was small, certainly no cruiser or battleship. Likely, a frigate or a destroyer, judging by the height and width of its corridors. As if to remind him of the potential proximity of his enemies, voices from unseen warriors resounded ahead. They sounded transhuman, and they were shouting, obviously in combat.

Instinctively, he reached for a sidearm that was no longer there. He didn’t even have the sigil, and felt its loss as if it were a missing limb. He had to get it back.

Heading off in the opposite direction to where the voices were emanating from, Numeon went hunting. Xenut Sul had the sigil, and would be made to relinquish it before he died.

Inviglio left the apothecarion and shook his head at the others waiting for him outside.

‘All of them?’ asked Bracheus.

‘Dead, brother. All fifty-three of them. I finished two off myself that could not have lived.’

‘Throne of Earth…’ muttered Petronius, glancing down at his boots.

Gordianius hissed a quiet oath.

Naevius racked the slide on his bolter. ‘At least we can avenge them.’

‘No,’ said Inviglio, his tone severe and brooking no argument. ‘One of the slabs was empty. Bloody marks led to the door. I think someone escaped.’

‘Then we must find him,’ said Bracheus, fiercely.

‘So, where is this errant prisoner going?’ asked Naevius. ‘He could be anywhere on the ship.’

Inviglio met his questioning gaze.

‘What would you do in his place?’

It took two seconds for Naevius’s frown to turn into a scowl.

‘I’d find the one responsible for what happened to my comrades, and I’d kill him.’

‘The master of this vessel,’ Bracheus agreed.

The Red-marked headed for the bridge.

Scavenging weapons in a close-quarters boarding action was easy enough, and Numeon now carried a half-loaded bolt pistol in one hand and a short combat blade in the other. While a far cry from the halberd he had once wielded as one of the Pyre Guard, his purloined armaments would have to suffice.

Xenut Sul was a sadist, but he was also no coward. It was possible he had joined the defenders in trying to repel their boarders, but Numeon thought it more likely he had retreated to the bridge to coordinate the counter-attack from there. In a ship this size, it would be close to the prow. Numeon had enough of his wits about him to know which direction to head in. The bridge would not be far from the apothecarion, and he only needed to go up three decks before finding the right level of the ship.

Numeon had yet to see a single legionary without the dark red battleplate of the XVII, and managed to avoid the Word Bearers. Judging by the distant sounds of fighting, they had greater concerns, but Numeon still needed to convince himself that this was not some deeper plot to further damage his mind and wrench loose whatever secrets they thought he possessed.

Standard tactics during an incursion would be to disperse defenders around the ship, to hold and protect vital bulkheads leading to volatile regions of the ship, where a small insurgent force could cause a disproportionate amount of damage.

It would leave the exterior access corridor to the bridge largely unguarded with only a single Word Bearer at his post outside.

Numeon did not know what strength remained in his body. He only knew he had to endure. If he could find the sigil, somehow get off this ship… Ever since Isstvan, hope had been his guiding principle. He cleaved to it now, readying for the near-suicidal run down the corridor. Three rounds were all that were left in the pistol. It trembled in his grasp, forcing Numeon to admit he could barely raise the weapon, let alone aim it.

Will was everything. Vulkan had taught him that.

It is our will, our determination that lets us fight on when others cannot. It is our will that gives us the strength to self-sacrifice and endure beyond hope…

How Numeon wished his primarch was here to say those words to him now. In spite of the memory, he found he could not recall the sound of Vulkan’s voice.

Some said it was the first thing you forgot when someone died and it troubled Numeon greatly that, even with his transhuman abilities, he could not bring its cadence and timbre to mind.

Numeon had no wish to die, to sell his life cheaply in some final, vainglorious act. He hesitated not out of fear but from a desire for his sacrifice to have meaning, for all of this to have some greater purpose.

Vengeance was a petty motive, the province of lesser men. Numeon told himself this was not about revenge. He fooled his head, but not his heart.

Effective kill range for a bolt pistol against an armoured legionary was roughly halfway down the corridor. Given his debilitated condition and paucity of ammunition, Numeon knew he would need to get closer. He turned the combat knife he had clenched in his hand around, so the blade faced down. Quicker to slash, to throw.

His had always been a fool's hope, he supposed.

'Vulkan lives,' he whispered, sighting on his prey…

…when the Word Bearer's visor erupted in a fount of gore and displaced bone. The traitor gargled blood, clutching at where his face used to be, and fell forwards.

An ally? An insurrection? Numeon could not tarry to consider this sudden stroke of provenance. The resonant clang of the dead Word Bearer's armoured form hitting the deck had still not faded by the time the Salamander was on his feet and running for the bridge.

'Did you see that?' asked Venator, lowering his sniper rifle.

'A half-naked legionary,' Finius concurred.

'Inviglio's survivor?' suggested Corvun.

'Sprinting for the bridge,' added Laertes.

From the long access conduit leading to the bridge, the Ultramarines and their sergeant watched from the shadows as the onyx-skinned Nocturnean raced from the junction and leapt over the traitor Venator had just executed, before barrelling onto the bridge.

'He's going to get himself killed,' said the sergeant, sourly.

The door to the bridge was neither locked nor barred, and as it parted with a faint hiss of released pressure, Numeon saw his enemy revealed.

Xenut Sul was alone, standing on a command dais with his back to the Salamander.

Cautiously, Numeon stepped inside. He reached halfway up the stepped dais

when the Word Bearer spoke.

'This ship is overrun,' he said, gesturing to the scenes of carnage described on grainy, incorporeal hololiths surrounding him.

Legionaries emblazoned with the noble sigil of the ultima were marauding throughout the vessel, sons of Guilliman on a rescue mission.

Xenut Sul shut off the hololith array with a clenched fist, extinguishing the circle of jade light around him. In its absence, the bodies of humans wearing the livery of the XVII Legion were revealed at his feet.

'And I killed the crew.'

'Where is the sigil?' Numeon demanded, moving up the dais to where Xenut Sul awaited him unarmed. His hands were by his sides, the fuller held in the left.

'My honour forbids me from taking my own life,' Xenut Sul answered, yet to turn, 'but your interrogators will not force me to betray my Legion.'

Numeon frowned. 'What?'

It was only when he heard the racking of bolter slides and the sound of booted feet against the deck that he realised Xenut Sul had not been talking to him.

'Stand down, Salamander,' uttered a firm, commanding voice.

Numeon turned to find a squad of Ultramarines with their weapons pointed at him and Xenut Sul.

Their sergeant removed his crested helm.

A pair of blades was sheathed at his back, and his bolt pistol was mag-locked to his thigh. Blond, close-cropped hair framed a warrior's face, youthful but hardened by war. His eyes shone azure, sharp and alert. He was vital, strong and enjoyed his appointed task.

'I am Pyre Captain Artellus Numeon,' said Numeon, 'and I claim this prisoner for Vulkan. And what he carries.'

'Vulkan? I have not heard that name in a while,' the sergeant's face darkened, 'at least not happily.'

At a silent signal the four Ultramarines in the sergeant's squad fanned out, two either side of the command dais, to encircle Xenut Sul.

Numeon went to intercede but the sergeant's voice stopped him.

'Daresay you have looked better, Captain Numeon, and in your prime you might have even given us a fight.' He smiled, then shook his head. 'But not like this, and we are not enemies, the two of us,' he added, gesturing to the purloined bolt pistol and combat knife Numeon still carried. 'Put them down.'

'Not until I have what is mine.'

'I have known Salamanders to be stubborn, defiant even. That's a quality I

greatly admire, but don't make me apprehend you. I would prefer not to mark your or my honour that way.'

Numeon was adamant. 'The sigil.'

Nodding to one of his men, the sergeant took the item after Xenut Sul was relieved of it and gave it back to Numeon.

'Is in our possession. Now,' the sergeant said sternly, 'lower your weapons.'

After gratefully accepting the sigil, Numeon obeyed.

'You do not know what this means,' he murmured, cradling the hammer for a moment.

'I know it led us right to you,' the sergeant replied, one eye on his men as they pushed Xenut Sul to his knees, and shackled his wrists.

Numeon looked up. Faintly, through the sergeant's vox, he heard other Ultramarines' voices.

'Second squad,' he explained. 'They're securing the ship before we atomise it.' Looking over Numeon's shoulder, he nodded up to Xenut Sul, who was now bound and prepared for departure. 'You're coming too, traitor. Lord Prayto will have questions.'

Xenut Sul smiled thinly but didn't rise to the bait beyond that.

The Sergeant returned his gaze to Numeon.

'Don't worry, Salamander. Yours will be a warmer greeting.'

'Where?' asked Numeon.

'Where else? Macragge.'

'The heart of Ultramar?' asked Numeon.

'Yes,' said the sergeant, his face darkening again. 'There is a lot you don't know, but for now let's get you off this ship and into our apothecarion.'

'Sergeant,' said Numeon, as they were leaving.

The Sergeant turned.

'My gratitude,' Numeon told him. 'I thought…' He let the admission fade, deeming it unworthy, and instead asked, 'What is your name?'

'Thiel,' the sergeant replied, as he put his helmet back on, 'Aeonid Thiel.'

SIX

Defiance

Strike cruiser Defiance of Calth, *Ultramar*

Since his rescue, Numeon had stayed in quiet seclusion.

For the first few days aboard the *Defiance of Calth,* he had been confined to the apothecarion. During his ministrations, he learned of Thiel's mission to cleanse the outer worlds of Ultramar of the traitors who still lingered there, caustic and cancerous to his primarch's grand ideals.

Much had been achieved since Guilliman's hard-fought victory, which had seen not one but two rebel primarchs waging war against him on Ultramarian soil. According to Thiel, there was still much to be done. Much soldiering. Politics and governance were of less interest. By his own candid admission, Thiel was ill-suited to them. It was a large part of the reason he had left Calth, less a war of reconquest and more a transparent act of propaganda.

Such concerns were strange to Numeon. On the death world of Nocturne, survival not politics dominated the minds of its leaders. But then, Ultramar had lost so much during its war, its needs and the needs of its peoples were more complex and less obvious. For that, Numeon did not envy them, or their liege lord. He preferred the isolation and self-sufficiency inherent in the Promethean creed.

That cultural mentality extended to Numeon's stay on the ship.

As soon as he had returned to some measure of health, he discharged himself from the Apothecary's care and sought solitude in the lower decks where he now made his quarters.

Sergeant Thiel had visited him once during his convalescence to deliver a small cache of weapons, requested by Numeon. He had also been outfitted with a suit

of light carapace. No legionary battleplate could be spared. Numeon had accepted all gratefully and was quick to employ his forgesmith's craft on the armour. Where before there was dull and blank metal, Numeon had engraved Nocturnean sigils and ornamentation. From functional carapace, it had become an artisan's creation of pure beauty.

'I can't imagine what you must think of our prosaic trappings, son of Nocturne,' said a familiar voice from the entrance to Numeon's chambers.

The scent of embers prickled the air with heat and the aroma of ash. It was heady in the small room, part of which Numeon had turned into a modest training arena, a fighting circle delineated by charcoal markings. His bed was a rough pallet, little more than a hard slab, tucked away in one corner. Both his weapons and finely wrought armour were laid out in front of it.

Numeon froze in mid-stance at the sound of Thiel's voice, gladius in hand.

'I asked to remain undisturbed, sergeant,' he said, curtly.

Thiel stepped into the lambent firelight. Numeon had set several makeshift braziers burning throughout the room.

'Are you trying to burn down my ship, Artellus?'

'I am engaging in Promethean ritual combat. It's a training routine.'

Thiel smiled. 'I know what you're doing, Salamander. I came to ask if you would show it to the rest of us.'

Numeon continued moving through his patterns, executing each one precisely and methodically.

'Do Ultramarines not have their own doctrines to observe?'

'We used to call them practicals and theoreticals. I am student of many doctrines, though. I like to keep an open mind.'

'You trained the legionaries aboard this ship?' asked Numeon, unceasing in his physical regimen as he moved increasingly quickly around the circle.

Thiel was standing at the very edge, close to the Salamander's arcing blade on several occasions, but he did not move or flinch.

'I did. They are the Red-marked.'

'That sounds like pride, son of Guilliman.'

Thiel shrugged. 'It is merely a fact.'

'I saw the crimson slash on their helms and faces,' said Numeon. 'What does it denote?'

Now Thiel laughed. 'Censure.'

Numeon paused to regard the Ultramarine. Despite the fact they hailed from different Legions, the Salamander was still a captain and Thiel a sergeant.

Numeon outranked him.

'You fashioned a unit based on insubordination?'

Thiel shook his head, his humour fading. 'Mine, not theirs.' He caught the look of incredulity in Numeon's eyes and said, 'I ran scenarios pitting legionaries against one another, trying to determine how to defeat them. It was before the rebellion was known.'

'And your men must share in your shame?'

Thiel clenched and unclenched his teeth, using the few seconds to master his emotions.

'In Ultramar, beyond the primus worlds,' he said, 'whole systems are still burning. I could not allow that fire to rage unchecked. On Macragge, on Calth and Iax and Konor, our enemy was bold. Once revealed, our fight for survival was obvious. Simple.' He shrugged, a gesture part resignation, part acceptance. 'Out on the fringes…' Thiel shook his head. 'Not so straightforward. The first few ships we tracked down already had Ultramarines aboard.' His eyes darkened at the memory. 'Some were of our Legion. Some weren't. Some wore our slain brothers' armour in an effort to confuse us. Some wore their actual flesh. In those first few weeks, we lost a lot of men. I came close to shutting it all down, but I knew we couldn't, not while the worlds still burned. We formed a new practical.'

'The red stripe,' guessed Numeon, to which Thiel nodded.

'A mark to differentiate friend from foe, something our enemy would never learn and so could never exploit.'

'Not an easy task.' Numeon's mind briefly went back to Isstvan. He doubted he would ever cleanse the horror of that battle from his thoughts.

Thiel looked thoughtful too. 'No, it most assuredly isn't. Even for the best of us.'

Numeon raised an eyebrow. 'The voice of further experience?' he asked.

'Not mine, my primarch's. I tried to kill him, you see.'

'You did what?' Numeon still had his blade unsheathed. His hand now tensed around the grip. Another ploy?

Thiel raised a hand in apology. 'Bad habit, my humour,' he said. 'Another legionary bearing my name and a facsimile of my armour infiltrated my lord's residency with nine others and attempted to murder him.'

'Vulkan's blood! How?'

'Their subterfuge was very good.'

Numeon relaxed, but was appalled at the implications of Thiel's story. 'Nothing is what it seems any more.'

‘No, it isn’t. Let us say also that after that the reunion between father and son was a little more fraught than I had anticipated.’

‘Perhaps we should all mark our battleplate with a secret sign to differentiate friend from foe.’

‘I had considered it,’ admitted Thiel. ‘At any rate my unit maintains the red mark even though the renegades have stopped wearing the armour of dead heroes now, a fact for which I am profoundly grateful.’

‘So now you train others how to kill legionaries?’

‘Seemed prudent. Having recently gained Lord Guilliman’s sanction made any reprisals defunct.’

‘Secured after he’d let you through the front gate, I assume?’

Thiel smiled at a memory. ‘Port Hera played stage to one of the tenser engagements I’ve seen in Magna Macragge Civitas.’

‘Yes, I expect it did.’

Satisfied with Thiel’s explanation, Numeon resumed his circuit of the arena. His onyx-black body was shining with exertion, his sweat like steam condensing on the surface of a rock. It gathered in the scars engraved into his flesh, sigils honouring his many deeds. Artellus Numeon was one of the few whose brands extended across almost his entire body, such was his legacy of heroism – one he felt he had not upheld. His flesh also carried the remembered wounds of his torture and these were grim to look upon.

Thiel did him the service of appearing not to notice.

‘Gets heavy, doesn’t it.’

Numeon paused, wondering at first if the Ultramarine had somehow read his thoughts, but realised he had meant a different burden.

Thiel gestured to the gladius Numeon was wielding.

The Salamander spared him a quick glance.

‘A forge hammer is heavy, sergeant,’ he replied. ‘This Ultramarian blade is merely unfamiliar.’

Numeon had progressed halfway through the next sword drill when he stopped short. Lowering the blade, he turned to Thiel.

‘You haven’t come to discuss the finer points of hand-to-hand combat or your tactical doctrine, have you, sergeant?’

‘I am surprised you haven’t asked about the prisoner.’

‘Xenut Sul? He is a traitor. He was my captor. Now he is not. What else is there to say?’

Thiel frowned. ‘Have you considered why they didn’t just kill you?’

‘For the same reason you allow Xenut Sul to live – answers.’

‘What are the questions, though, Artellus?’

‘Of no consequence,’ Numeon replied flatly. ‘At least not to Xenut Sul. He serves another.’

Here, Thiel nodded. ‘A preacher. Have you seen him?’

‘Only via hololith.’

‘The Red-marked have been hunting this traitor ever since I came back from Calth.’

‘You hope Xenut Sul will betray his master?’

Thiel shook his head.

‘I just need a man called Titus Prayto to pry open Xenut Sul’s mind for me.’

Numeon’s eyes narrowed.

‘You are not adept at this,’ he said.

Thiel’s surprise looked feigned. ‘At what?’

‘Lying. A Librarian awaits Xenut Sul. Your fervent hope is that he will be able to extract the answers you seek that will lead you to your quarry. You need no insight I can provide, Aeonid Thiel. So, I ask again, why are you here? I doubt it is to swap stories about our fathers.’

Thiel’s gaze drifted from the severe countenance of the Salamander to a point behind him in his chambers.

‘Ah…’

Numeon followed the Ultramarine’s line of sight to where he had laid down Vulkan’s sigil.

‘A memorial?’ asked Thiel, without accusation.

‘Memorials are for the dead. Vulkan lives. I think of it as a shrine to honour him, before which I can reassert my oaths – those I swore when the Legion was reunited with its father.’

Numeon slowly walked over to the sigil and took hold of it reverently.

‘You said it guided you?’

Thiel nodded. ‘Without its transmitter signal, we would not have found you.’

‘I thought it was a beacon, but I have no knowledge of how to activate it.’ He regarded the hammer gently resting in the palms of his hands. ‘I clung to it so vehemently,’ he muttered to himself, ‘perhaps I could have…’

Numeon looked up at Thiel, leaving the rest of his remembrance unspoken.

‘Say what you have come to say,’ he said, latent anger flaring in the embers of his eyes.

To his credit, Thiel forewent any preamble.

‘Vulkan is dead. He died on Macragge. That’s why I’m taking you back there.’

The hard slab where Numeon meditated and slept possessed more emotion in that moment than the Salamander.

Despite the heat, an icy chill entered the chamber.

‘You saw his body?’

‘I was given the news,’ Thiel admitted. ‘I have no reason to doubt its veracity. He is dead, brother.’ Thiel approached, about to put a conciliatory hand on the Salamander’s shoulder, but Numeon recoiled.

‘Do not try to console me, sergeant,’ he said coldly. ‘Do not mistake my Promethean creed for grief. I *believe* Vulkan is alive. Every time I see his sigil and feel the warmth of its captured forge heat in my hands, I *know* this to be true.’

‘Cousin, please.’

Numeon held up his hand in a gesture for silence.

‘We Salamanders are taught to be masters of our emotions. As such, we are not given to sudden bouts of apoplexy, but you risk the failure of that resolve if you try to convince me of my father’s death.’

‘He lies in state, a cold corpse in Macragge’s deepest mausoleum. His sons maintain a vigil over his body.’ Exasperated, Thiel shook his head. ‘Artellus–’

But Numeon would not hear it. He scowled, disgusted.

‘The preacher was a more gifted dissembler. He spoke of the fulgurite, a weapon of immense power, capable of slaying an immortal primarch… *My* primarch. I reject you both. I deny these falsehoods, though I cannot fathom why a loyal son of Guilliman would manufacture such an obvious and heinous lie.’

Anger and pity warred in Thiel’s eyes as he met Numeon’s gaze.

‘You are not yourself, brother-captain, so I shall overlook your insults. I speak truthfully, to the very best of my knowledge.’

‘Then it is your knowledge that is flawed, sergeant,’ countered Numeon, ending the conversation with a simple declaration. ‘Vulkan lives.’

‘Cling to what hope you must, Salamander,’ said Thiel, as he left the chamber. ‘For none here wishes it were true more than I. But cast aspersions on my honour again, even in grief, and I will give you a salutary lesson with that gladius you labour over.’

The door slammed in his wake, leaving Numeon alone in silence.

And denial.

SEVEN

Servant of the Word

Magna Macragge Civitas, Eastern Keep

They had moved the prisoner.

His defiance baffling – not because of the reason behind it but rather the physical and mental endurance it demonstrated – it had been determined a deeper pit was necessary to extract the answers desired.

Yet, every time the questions were asked, the prisoner responded exactly as he had before.

Even when physical duress led to invasive psychic interrogation, the words did not change.

Nothing moved him. He demonstrated no fear or outward sign of regret at his circumstances.

Bloody, battered, the prisoner looked up at his interrogator with a wary but amused expression as he spat out a tooth.

'That was a solid hit. I actually felt that one,' he said. 'You should be proud.'

Watching from the shadows, Titus Prayto was not.

Throughout the beating, he had dug furrows into the prisoner's psyche with as sharp a mental scalpel as he possessed, but yielded nothing.

The warrior armoured in cobalt-blue facing the prisoner rotated his shoulder, preparing to strike again.

'Enough,' Prayto uttered calmly.

The other Ultramarine seemed reluctant to stand down and remained in place, clenching and unclenching his bloody gauntlet.

'Enough, sergeant,' Prayto repeated more firmly.

Sergeant Valentius turned and nodded, breathless with exertion. He looked

almost as tired as the prisoner.

Prayto met the sergeant's weary gaze. 'Leave us.'

Valentius bowed curtly and exited the cell.

As the door clanged loudly behind the sergeant, Prayto stepped out of the gloom. Lingering at the edge of the corona of light cast by a single hanging phosphor globe, he drew back his hood. A scholar's face was revealed behind its folds, overly pale from time spent in the Library of Ptolemy within the Fortress of Hera, and perpetually troubled.

Titus Prayto had dark, close-cropped hair like so many of his legionary brothers. Unlike his fellow Ultramarines, his grey eyes were soft, but possessed of a hunger for knowledge. This, and his recently reinstated psychic abilities, made him an excellent interrogator.

Prayto turned to his charge now.

The prisoner had been afforded a moment of respite and hung his head, but as soon as Prayto came closer, he looked up at the Librarian.

'What now, more scrying?' he asked in a grating voice.

Never taking his eyes off the prisoner, Prayto gently shook his head.

'We are beyond that.'

Barthusa Narek's eyes brightened. He looked tired, and not just on account of enforced sleep deprivation. 'Death then.'

'Nothing so merciful. We shall talk.'

Narek sagged, suddenly wearier.

'Do you know the definition of madness?' he asked, then answered, 'It is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result.'

'Whom do you serve, Narek?' asked Prayto regardless, as he began to walk the circle of light.

'Come now, Titus, are we not on first-name terms after all this time?'

Prayto repeated firmly. 'Whom do you serve?'

Narek sighed, his pugilist's features softening momentarily.

'So we return to this again.'

Narek was unlike any Word Bearer that Prayto had ever met. He had a soldier's gait, and the stolid tread of a footslogger, though he was also reputedly an expert marksman. His manner and appearance would be better suited to Inwit rather than Colchis, but there was a sort of fervour in his eyes. Not the raw, manic sort of fanaticism Prayto had seen before in the Bearers of the Word but purpose and determination.

'I serve the Word,' said Narek, 'as you already know. Whom do you serve, your

primarch or your Emperor?'

Prayto knew he should not answer but hoped a change of tack might yield some as yet hidden truth from the warrior.

'One does not exclude the other. I serve both. And what "Word" is that?'

Narek smiled; it was an altogether ugly gesture in a face not well accustomed to levity.

'An empire here, an empire there,' he said, 'and you a loyal son to both.'

'It is you who lacks conviction, traitor, entirely loyal to no one.'

Narek snapped, 'Do not doubt my conviction! It is absolute!'

As the Word Bearer strained against the chains anchoring his neck, wrists and ankles to the floor, Prayto slammed a blow into Narek's solar plexus, returning him to his seat.

'Did I strike a nerve?' Prayto asked, resuming his slow circling of the prisoner.

Narek spat blood.

'Yours are on edge, I think,' he said.

Prayto paused at the accusation, but did not stop. Narek followed the Librarian's repeating orbit when the shackles allowed. He met his gaze now with narrowed eyes.

'Why did you have me moved from my original cell?' asked Narek, looking around to gesture to his current surroundings. 'This dungeon looks no more secure than the last.'

Again, Prayto did not answer. The prisoner was speaking freely. He wanted to see where this was going.

'Would you like to know my theory?'

'Tell me,' said Prayto.

'I think your city is not as safe as you lead others to believe. I think you know my Legion or one of its allies is coming for me and might already be abroad in your streets. I smell the blood on them still,' Narek sneered, 'as I am ferried from place to place. And I can taste the fear of its populace, growing cancerously in sympathy with their doubt in you, their protectors.'

He leaned forwards again, much less aggressively this time.

'So, tell me, Titus Prayto, how safe do you really feel?'

Prayto stopped circling, and descended to his haunches so he could stare at the prisoner eye to eye.

'Safer than you, I'd warrant. Are they coming to try and save you or kill you, I wonder?'

Narek eased back, unmoved by the Librarian's implied threat.

‘It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that they’re coming. You’d best be ready when they do.’

‘Ready for whom?’ asked Prayto.

Narek didn’t answer. His gaze went to the floor.

Prayto doused the light with a thought. The interrogation was over. Nothing further would be learned.

‘Titus…’ said Narek as the Ultramarine reached the cell door.

Prayto paused, but did not turn.

‘You asked me what Word…’

Still Prayto waited and did not turn.

‘When I touched the fulgurite, I was given a glimpse of its power, of the Emperor’s power. The Word I serve is that He on Earth is a divine being, a god who claims to be mortal. That is the truth I serve.’

Prayto’s gauntleted hand hovered over the door. He was about to reply when he thought better of it.

The cell door clanged shut in the Librarian’s wake, leaving the prisoner alone.

Sergeant Valentius was waiting outside.

He scowled. ‘I will be glad of the day Lord Guilliman finally sanctions the execution of that creature.’

‘Many incarcerated within these halls are worthy of similar judgement, yet they live.’

‘Thiel brings back many stray dogs that require euthanising,’ Valentius muttered. ‘But this one slew a primarch, or had some part in his murder. Surely, there can be little of value left to learn.’

Since the war, a period of fractious peace had settled across Macragge, and while the primus worlds remained largely unmolested, those at the fringes of the Ultramarian empire were still preyed upon by traitors. Aeonid Thiel had taken it upon himself to seek out these small warbands and exterminate them. Occasionally, when he could, he returned with prisoners to be broken by the Legion Librarius, in the hope the interrogated would reveal the location of further bandits.

‘It might not be his decision, brother,’ said Prayto.

Now Valentius frowned. Prayto paid little heed, nodding to the helmeted guards as he and the sergeant walked down the long corridor of the Eastern Keep in brisk lockstep. They passed several other cells on their way to the Glorian Gate, which would lead them through the Aegis Wall.

‘If not Guilliman’s, then whose?’ asked Valentius, nonplussed.

Prayto faced him with an incredulous, amused expression.

‘Who do you think? Sanguinius, our emperor on Macragge.’

Valentius was no dullard, but the sergeant looked genuinely taken aback at Prayto’s frankness.

‘But this is Ultramar.’

‘No, brother,’ Prayto answered sagely. ‘It’s Imperium Secundus now.’

Odious as it was to admit, Narek had been right. There was upheaval in the Civitas, minor and alloyed to civilian and political rather than military concerns, but unrest all the same.

There had been… *incidents* and now warriors wearing cobalt-blue battleplate bearing the XIII Legion’s ultima regularly patrolled the streets. Curfews had been enforced after dark, and not just because of the murderous primarch who had yet to be accounted for. A dark mood pervaded, and did so beyond the common populace. It lingered in the council chambers too, tainting the words of the ambassadors from other Legions with compromise.

Dark Angels, White Scars, Iron Hands, Blood Angels… August and honourable Legions all, but not meant to be arrayed together, impotent of purpose. Discord and restiveness were inevitable.

With his gifts, Prayto felt the irritation being suppressed by the other Legions more than most.

A storm was gathering strength. Either it would blow itself out, or it would break upon the city. It was worse farther out, away from the seats of power on Macragge.

Ultramar was no longer the empire of a half-millennium of worlds. At its distant edges, some of those worlds still burned. Even though the war was over within the primus regions, the fringes were lawless places. Everyone who had read the reports and seen the refugee chains knew it. But in this era of hard-fought freedom and prosperity, few were willing to acknowledge it.

But of all the unrest that had manifested in the capital, none stirred more so than the XVIII.

At last their errant lord had been found, but the truth of his arrival had been kept from them. Vulkan’s presence had only been revealed after his death, the primarch slain by the very weapon a traitor had brought to Macragge. That fact too was concealed, and remained so. To do anything else would have been to invite further discord, possibly even violent recrimination. And yet, Titus Prayto could not swear to himself that the obfuscation surrounding Barthusa Narek was

just.

Did the sons of Vulkan not deserve vengeance, or at least to know one of those complicit in their father's death was being held on Macragge?

Titus felt weary, and tried to ease the tension from his mind by massaging his forehead with his fingers. Nothing could ease his guilt.

The fulgurite had yet to be removed from Vulkan's corpse, if it even could be.

A greater thorn was that his murderer still lived.

EIGHT

Return to the Pyre

Magna Macragge Civitas, the landing fields

The sky over Magna Macragge Civitas was thronged with ships. Military and civilian vessels, gunships and freighters, all vied for dominance in the steadily crowding airspace over the city.

'So many of them,' remarked Numeon, peering through the port-side vision slit of a Thunderhawk as it angled down through scads of cloud.

A belt of turbulence shook the diminutive gunship – part tempestuous air current, part engine wash from the larger vessels – making Numeon curse as he reached for the troop hold's overhead guide rail.

'We've taken to mag-locking ourselves to the deck,' said Inviglio, gesturing to his armoured boots.

Numeon's light carapace unfortunately did not possess the same adhesive facility as the Ultramarine's battleplate. Finding the fragility of his armour perturbing, the Salamander yearned to don ceramite and adamantium again.

'I will miss the Warhawk,' he replied, gently bemoaning their current mode of transport too. 'Stormbirds are both reliable and robust.' He rapped his knuckles against the inner hull, creating an echoing return of thick but still arguably fragile metal. 'I cannot see these lighter gunships suiting the Legions.'

Inviglio kept his own counsel on the matter, and instead turned his attention to the glut of vessels all trying to dock at the landing fields.

'Refugees,' he explained, apropos of nothing, 'from the fringes. Every time we come back their numbers increase.' He directed Numeon's attention to a bulky, slab-nosed freighter. 'Labour serfs from Iax, Konor and Throne knows where else.'

‘This Imperium Secundus you mentioned,’ said Numeon, recalling an earlier conversation, ‘it still needs much in the way of building.’

‘More like rebuilding,’ Inviglio replied without thinking. He clamped his mouth shut. Too late.

Numeon met his gaze.

Both legionaries went without helmets, the Salamander because he did not have one and the Ultramarine because he held his in the crook of his arm.

He looked young, Numeon decided. According to Sergeant Thiel, the XIII Legion had suffered heavy losses during the invasion. Practically it made sense to replenish any shortfall quickly. Inviglio was fresh-blooded, but he had earned some battle experience under the sergeant of the Red-marked.

‘Explain,’ said Numeon, his tone neutral.

Inviglio relayed what he knew about Vulkan’s arrival on Macragge. It wasn’t much but Numeon absorbed every morsel with quiet detachment.

‘So, he fought here,’ the Salamander murmured, casting his gaze across the sprawling vista of the city.

‘Aye, it’s what I have heard.’

Numeon said nothing further. Instead, he regarded the Civitas. At first, all he saw were the peaks of mountains, a rugged coastline, the tallest spires jutting through cloud. But as they descended, he caught a glimpse of grand archways too, then soaring towers and minarets, then smaller structures like barrack houses and depots. Grey bands winding between the buildings became streets and roads. A ribbon of silver became a river. Lower still, he watched the troops as they patrolled, some clad in Legionary plate. He saw the citizens attending to their business. Some huddled in small groups, talking, bustling, smoking tabac or giving the hulking Ultramarines a wide berth; others hurried quietly and alone, giving furtive glances to any perceivable threat.

This was not a city at peace; it was one not entirely comfortable with itself.

From the plebeian masses and their august protectors, Numeon’s eye strayed back to the horizon. There, tall towers rose up like gun barrels from hard Macraggian bedrock that had once been the seat of its ancient warrior kings. Amongst the banners and flags of the Ultramarines, he saw the heraldry of Blood Angels and Dark Angels. There were lesser pennants too, and he recognised the iconography of White Scars, Iron Hands, Raven Guard and even Space Wolves.

The last banner upon which his gaze alighted was painfully familiar – a drake’s head, the symbol of Lord Vulkan, fluttering morbidly at half-mast.

Inviglio saw it too – Numeon could tell by the sudden cessation of the

Ultramarine's breathing, as if he had made a second error in judgement and hoped his stalled respiration would halt time and thus allow him the opportunity for redress.

This time, Numeon kept his own counsel. He looked away, neither legionary acknowledging what they had seen and what it meant.

Firing stabiliser jets filled the uncomfortable silence, followed a few seconds later by the Thunderhawk's landing stanchions unfolding and touching the ground. Raucous turbofans were still down-cycling when a second figure entered the troop hold from the cockpit. Barring the gunship's crew, two Ultramarines had come with Numeon from aboard the *Defiance of Calth*.

There was a fourth passenger too, but he remained shackled and entombed within an incarceration casket, strapped and locked down at the back of the hold.

Aeonid Thiel barely glanced at it before nodding curtly to Inviglio as he entered the hold from the cockpit. His gaze then came to rest on Numeon.

'Your kin have gathered to receive you, Artellus,' said Thiel as he approached. 'The Lords of Macragge will want an audience with you soon as well.'

'I hope they are patient,' Numeon replied.

Thiel looked down at the Salamander's proffered hand.

'Both my deeds and words towards you were unworthy, brother-sergeant. I meant no dishonour.'

Surprised at such humility, Thiel looked up and the two legionaries gripped each other's forearms in the manner of warriors.

'Apology accepted, Artellus.'

Satisfied, Numeon nodded.

'You return to the outer worlds again?' he asked.

'Once the prisoner is delivered to Titus Prayto… yes, I'll return.'

'I get the impression Macragge is not really where you want to be,' suggested Numeon, a furtive glance at Inviglio revealing to the Salamander the feelings of the Red-marked. Why else would they have joined Thiel if they did not agree with his philosophy?

'Politics are for a different breed of legionary,' Thiel answered honestly. 'My role is…' he reached for the right word, '…*simpler,*' he said.

A wry smile pulled at the corner of Numeon's lips as he said, 'Perhaps you are a better politician than you think.'

Thiel laughed, briefly and dismissively, but took no offence, for none was meant.

Behind Numeon the embarkation ramp had begun to open with the dull drone

of machinery.

‘Go well, Artellus.’

A look of sudden urgency crossed Numeon’s face as he remembered something just before he was about to leave. He began to unclasp the gladius attached to his weapons belt.

‘Your blade…’

Thiel put up his hand in a stopping gesture.

‘Keep it. The way you were slogging that gladius around, you need the practice.’

Numeon graciously accepted, smiling at the Ultramarine’s mild gibe. He reached up to his breastplate and unclasped an engraved besagew. It was exquisitely fashioned and unique.

‘Now we are allies,’ he said, handing the small, round plate to Thiel.

Humbled, the Ultramarine bowed his head.

With a heavy and resounding clang, the ramp touched the ground. It was time to leave.

‘I didn’t see it before,’ said Thiel. ‘But I see it now. I’ll hope as you hope, Salamander. For a miracle… Vulkan lives.’

Inviglio echoed his sergeant and the two Ultramarines stepped back so Numeon could be reunited with his brothers.

The walk down the ramp was slow, and every footfall upon it echoed dolefully. Near silence greeted Artellus Numeon on the landing fields. An area had been cordoned off for his arrival, where several legionaries had gathered.

He saw the by now familiar pairings of Iron Hands and Raven Guard, recognising similar cells to the one he had been part of. Memories of Traoris, the brothers he had lost, both Salamander and not, returned and it was hard not to relive the grief of their passing again.

A lone Fenrisian prowled the edge of the throng, watching and scowling. More prominent than the Space Wolf but equally inscrutable was a White Scars legionary. Sitting upon a weapons crate, the Chogorian smoothed his moustaches and deigned to nod in Numeon’s direction although the two had never met.

The last legionary who drew the Salamander’s eye appeared and disappeared quickly. A casual observer it seemed, Numeon was left with the impression of grey, nondescript armour, but it was hard to tell in fading daylight. In any case, his attention was quickly arrested by someone he knew approaching from the gathering with open arms.

‘Brother!’

Zytos clasped Numeon in a firm embrace, which he returned belatedly and awkwardly before being let go.

Var'kir, coming forwards as the overjoyed Zytos reluctantly retreated, was more restrained and merely bowed, but the gladness in his eyes at Numeon's survival was obvious.

Other fire-born stood at the fringes, a woefully small cadre, nodding and smiling at their returning captain. It was a brief shaft of light in an otherwise dark reunion, Numeon's humour quick to fade as he looked Var'kir in the eye.

'Where is our father?' he asked.

After escorting Numeon to the landing field, Thiel and Inviglio got airborne and headed for the Eastern Keep.

A small docking pad jutted from the summit of the formidable bastion, its walls grey and unyielding. With the onset of night, a clarion rang out from one of the buttressed towers signalling curfew. Engine drone from the approaching gunship hummed loudly on the air, drawing the attention of mounted search lamps. Strafing the encroaching darkness, two grainy beams alighted on the Ultramarines craft, edging it in pearlescent white.

From the guardhouse that shared the docking pad, two fully armoured legionaries tramped out with bolters locked across their chests.

Automated gun nests, situated at the four cardinal points around the tower that housed the docking pad, swivelled as they achieved target alignment on the slowly descending gunship.

Thiel kept the side hatch open throughout their descent, watching the tower defences keenly. He knew Inviglio was standing ready at the embarkation ramp, having eased Xenut Sul's casket to the troop compartment's threshold. Gravitic impellers lightened the heavy casket, and it needed only a gentle nudge from the Ultramarine to get it into position.

Its prisoner, and the potential knowledge Titus Prayto could extract from him, was far weightier.

Just before the gunship's clawed stanchions met the landing pad, Thiel leapt out of the open side hatch to jog around to the lowering embarkation ramp.

Inviglio waited on the other side and eased out the incarceration casket in front of him once the Thunderhawk had landed.

Flanking the prisoner either side, Thiel and Inviglio escorted the casket to the waiting guards, who signalled for them to halt whilst they voxed in and confirmed their arrival.

After a few seconds, one of the guards gestured for them to proceed and Thiel and Inviglio ushered the casket towards a tall access gate that led into the keep itself. Through the armourglass porthole wrought into the casket, so the prisoner could be seen at all times, Thiel had one last look at Xenut Sul.

The Word Bearer's eyes were open and unblinking, almost entranced. A solid metal brace had been inserted into his mouth so he couldn't speak, and Thiel thought he saw Xenut Sul gently gnawing at it as he tried to form some Colchisian canticle or benediction.

Thiel didn't try to mask his disgust. He would have liked nothing more than to take out his anger on this wretch, but a much more invasive punishment was in store for Xenut Sul.

Titus Prayto awaited the prisoner in one of the Eastern Keep's dungeons, and Thiel smiled at the thought of his brother taking the Word Bearer apart one mental sliver at a time.

What he didn't see after he looked and he and Inviglio passed through the grinding gate into the keep was that Xenut Sul was smiling too.

NINE

Absence

Magna Macragge Civitas, Vault of the Unbound Flame

‘What are his plans?’ asked Numeon as the platform to the vault slowly descended.

It was dark in the close confines of the conveyor with half-powered lumens situated in the floor the only light source. Numeon supposed it was meant to promote an air of solemnity, but it only stoked the furnace of his anger.

Zytos and Var’kir, accompanying him on the way to visit their father, felt it too.

‘He means to keep us here until the warp storm abates,’ Zytos replied. ‘Only then will he sanction our return to Nocturne.’

Numeon raised an eyebrow. ‘*Sanction?* Are we bound by Macragge’s laws then?’

Sensing the pain in Numeon, Var’kir interjected on Zytos’s behalf. ‘Whilst here on Macragge… yes, we are,’ he said sadly.

Since his arrival, Numeon had refused all offers of rest and sustenance. He still wore the carapace armour he had aboard the *Defiance of Calth,* even though Zytos had said a suit of legionary battleplate had been reforged for him.

Later perhaps, but Numeon had no desire to delay. He wanted to… *needed* to see with his own eyes what Thiel had told him, and what his brothers’ demeanour suggested.

That Vulkan was dead.

‘You are mistaken, brother,’ said Numeon, his eyes hard and fixed ahead to the doors that would soon admit him to the vaults. ‘No son of Nocturne is bound by the will of another primarch. We answer to Lord Vulkan, and him alone.’

‘Numeon–’ Zytos began, but Var’kir held up a hand to quieten him.

Instead, the Chaplain gently laid his hand on Numeon's shoulder.

'Do not counsel me,' Numeon warned, 'unless it is to advise how and when we can escort our father from this cold and wretched place.'

Var'kir let his hand fall and said nothing.

Silence descended like a hammer, its resonance deafening.

Mercifully for Zytos and Var'kir, the platform came to a shuddering halt and the doors to the vault opened a few moments later.

Numeon stepped out. He did so boldly, as dauntless as a rising storm, but there was a tremor in his body that belied his ostensible purpose.

To be confronted with the departed, those you have known and loved in life, is to be reminded of your own mortality. Lies and half-truths are stripped away in a moment of acceptance, anger bled dry before a glimpse of one's own frailty and the urge to arrest the great entropy slowly eroding one and all. To look upon the dead is to see an echo of what once was, a cruel and hollow shell as grey as dust. In the end that is the fate of every dead thing.

For Numeon the barb was more savage still because it served as a reminder of his most abject failure, for was it not his appointed task to protect his lord?

Darkness flooded the vault, as deep and black as an ocean trench. Fathomless, yet dredged of all hope, it lapped against the smooth walls and gathered oppressively around a beleaguered memorial flame. An invidious chill rested on the stale air like a layer of sharp frost in winter. Here, things came to wither and atrophy. They did not burn brightly in the fire of the mountain, a last flame to kindle another into a vital spark.

'You let them keep him in this place?' There was a snarl in Numeon's voice that went beyond accusation.

Zytos's pained expression almost gave way to rebuke before he caught sight of Var'kir. The Chaplain slowly shook his head so Zytos lowered his in mourning and hurtful frustration.

They both walked a few paces behind Numeon, content to let him lead.

It wasn't far to the golden casket where the Lord of Drakes lay in state, and as they closed, Var'kir signalled silently for Zytos to slow so that Numeon be afforded some small measure of solitude when he faced the irrefutable truth that Vulkan, their father, was dead.

Numeon slowed too, though he did it subconsciously, the gallows walk of a condemned man come to face his punishment.

For the longest time, he had believed Vulkan lived. He had *known* it in his every fibre, down to the deepest instinct in his gut. As he lay dying on the black

lightning fields of Traoris, his faith in Vulkan had sustained him. As the knives of Xenut Sul had carved his body, it was this mantra that made him endure.

'*Vulkan lives…*'

Unaware he had muttered the words aloud, Numeon grasped the sigil of his father tightly in another subconscious gesture as he approached the casket.

Whether it was the cold and darkness of the vault or brutal exhaustion, he no longer appeared convinced of his own rhetoric as he reached to touch the edge of Vulkan's gilded casket with a trembling hand.

'*Vulkan lives,*' Numeon uttered, lower than a whisper this time so only he could hear it as he dared to look upon his father lying in this tomb…

…then turned, his face contorted with anger.

'What is the meaning of this?' asked Numeon. 'Speak, now!'

Var'kir had expected grief, denial, even sorrowful anger, but not like this. He looked at Zytos then back to Numeon.

'Brother, I don't…' he began, stepping forwards. Zytos was right by his side as Var'kir approached Numeon.

'Look upon the casket, Var'kir,' Numeon raged, slamming his fist against the gilded metal. 'Tell me if your eyes see the same as mine do.'

Both Var'kir and Zytos rushed to the side of the casket at the same time.

Zytos gasped and fell to his knees, one hand against the casket to steady himself.

Eyes wide, Var'kir simply shook his head.

Numeon was incensed. 'Tell me,' he repeated to them both, 'where is our father?'

'He was here, Numeon,' replied Var'kir, casting his gaze about the room for some sign of what could have happened. 'I swear on my blood.'

Numeon had drawn his sword.

Zytos looked horrified, his mouth agape but shock turning to anger.

'There will be retribution for this.'

'Answer me, damn you!' Numeon grabbed a weighty chain strung around the Chaplain's neck. Var'kir was too shocked to resist, his eyes back on the casket.

'I don't know, brother,' he gasped, shaking his head in rising panic. 'I don't know.'

Behind the glass of the casket, which was sealed and unmolested, was an ashen void.

The casket was empty. Vulkan was gone.

The mood in the throne room was tense as an angry and impassioned delegation marched through its doors.

The propaganda and ceremony of the new emperor's coronation in Martial Square had been abandoned in favour of the much more austere surroundings of the Convincus Cubicularum. One of many audience halls in the Fortress of Hera, its name meant 'Chamber of Conquerors', an appellation that appeared to make its current incumbent ill at ease.

It was Sanguinius, not Guilliman, who ruled as regent in the swiftly dubbed Imperium Secundus. Ostensibly, it was a mantle the Blood Angels primarch wore with regal dignity, but the truth was somewhat different.

Unlike in Martial Square, there was no Propylae Titanicus to overshadow and invest the scene with a gravitas it perhaps did not deserve. Still, there were reminders of Imperial prowess that, while they could not eclipse the grandeur of the Titan's Gate, still provided a prideful context.

The banners of three Legions draped its marble columns, tapestries of their victories hung in the gaping alcoves between them, a triptych of martial wisdom, stoic order and angelic symbolism. These tenets were the foundation upon which Imperium Secundus was built, a second front to hold back the rising darkness and restore a measure of hope to a galaxy sorely in need of a saviour.

The light from lume-globes set into the walls failed to reach all the way to the back of the room where the banners hung, their rough fabrics cast in a shadowy glow that gave them imagined animation.

Present in the chamber was the Master of Ultramar, sitting on a marble throne to Emperor Sanguinius's right. Both of the primarchs wore their armour. Though Konrad Curze had not been seen in months, he continued to elude evasion. That the self-titled 'Night Haunter' had yet to strike against any of them suggested a plan was being conceived… or perhaps not at all. Konrad's murderous urges made him hard to predict. At the least, a stately suit of cobalt-blue war-plate would stand between Guilliman and the weapons of his enemies. It was prudent. Practical.

Sanguinius was less suspicious, and wore his gilded battleplate to signify his position as regent. His throne was more ostentatious than Guilliman's, but not by his own bidding. Adorned with the blood-drop sigil of his Legion, his armour made a fitting alliance with the throne, as did his angelic wings, though they remained furled during the council.

At Sanguinius's left, slightly removed from the other members of the lordly triumvirate, was the darker, more capricious figure of the Lion.

Ever on a war footing, Lion El'Jonson was clad in the deep black of the Dark Angels, a long ivory-coloured cloak slung over one shoulder.

None wore their helms, though the Lion kept his by his side next to a sheathed sword.

The lords of Imperium Secundus held court over a chosen gathering.

Word had reached the august lords that Vulkan was no longer cloistered within his funerary casket, that a cadre of Salamanders had come to their mourning vigil and found it empty of his body.

Urgent enquires were made, accusations of negligence and deceit, grief-driven as they were, rebuffed until one conclusion remained.

'Vulkan lives,' declared Numeon, wilfully ignoring the power of the primarchs in his midst. Though the Salamander looked to Sanguinius, it was Guilliman who responded.

'I saw my brother's cold body with my own eyes, Numeon. He is dead.'

Guilliman, Sanguinius and the Lion hold court in the Chamber of Conquerors

‘Then how, my lord, do you explain the fact he no longer lies in state?’ asked Var’kir.

‘Our father walks,’ Numeon was adamant, ‘and must be found.’

‘I don’t disagree,’ said Guilliman, ‘but do not cling to this hope–’

‘Hope?’ asked Numeon, despairingly, daring the primarch’s anger. ‘What is this place, if not founded on that very principle?’

A tremor along Guilliman’s noble jawline betrayed his annoyance at being spoken to thusly, but he kept his ire under close guard, nodding to concede the point.

‘Yours is false, driven by an understandable but weary desire to refute the truth of your eyes.’

Seeing Numeon’s rising anger, Var’kir went to intercede but was rebutted by the Pyre captain, whose focus swiftly returned to the primarch of the Ultramarines.

‘My eyes see an empty tomb – your brother, *my* father, having left his mortal repose. I demand he be found with all haste.’

‘A search is already under way throughout the Civitas conducted by my most trusted warriors, the Invictus Guard.’

Numeon was not placated. ‘By those who lost him in the first place.’

Now Guilliman scowled, and his gauntleted fists clenched. He glanced at the Lion, who watched the exchange keenly but kept to the shadows to mask his emotions.

An inquest into Guilliman’s leadership had begun, at first without him realising, but it wasn’t his role to lead. They had elected another, he and his brothers.

Marshalling his anger, hiding it in a manner accustomed to an arch statesman, Guilliman looked to Sanguinius. Their angelic emperor appeared uncomfortable despite his numinous poise and undeniable benevolence of countenance.

‘Alive or dead,’ uttered Sanguinius, his voice rich and melodic, ‘I swear to you we will find Vulkan. Your father will be returned and, if necessary, reparation made for this negligence.’

Numeon’s fire ebbed. Standing before the angelic lord, he relented.

‘Lord Sanguinius,’ he said more calmly, but still with the indignation of the betrayed, ‘I ask that my brothers and I be allowed to conduct this search.’

Guilliman was about to interject when Sanguinius inclined his head to signal accession.

Numeon was not finished.

‘And if my father yet lives, what punishment will there be for those who

claimed otherwise?'

Guilliman's cheekbones tensed at the ease with which his brother had defused the situation, and how the Salamander's ire was being directed solely at him, a fact that did not go unnoticed.

Though none would see it, or rather see it and believe it, a faint smile played about the Lion's lips as he looked on.

Through determination and willpower, Guilliman had sought to craft an empire. He did not desire the throne – to do so would smack of vainglory and selfishness – but he had envisaged being able to maintain order in his own house. Unafraid of the consequences, Numeon exposed the lie of that and had found support in the nascent regent of Imperium Secundus.

A tempest raged in the Blood Angel's eyes. The firelight caught in the sclera, turning it incarnadine. Ferocity and sadness marred his beauteous voice. All who heard it saw not a winged, celestial being before them but instead a wrathful avenger clad in red.

'I promise, if you have been deceived and Vulkan does indeed still draw breath,' Sanguinius declared, 'recompense will be made.'

Numeon nodded, seemingly satisfied before saying, 'And when he is returned to us, we are leaving Macragge.'

'Leaving?' asked the Lion with curious amusement. 'Where is it you think you will go?'

TEN

No stone unturned

Magna Macragge Civitas, Vault of the Unbound Flame

It began in the Castrum and left no chamber or alcove undisturbed as the search for Vulkan, alive or dead, reached as far as the Aegis Wall. No sign could be found and even the gilded mausoleum itself was scryed psychically by Titus Prayto to hunt for any spoor that might reveal how the deathly Lord of Drakes had managed such dramatic egress.

The skies were locked down so tight that removal of the primarch's body via shuttle was quickly discounted. But no record existed of the dead primarch having been taken from his sepulchral slumber and, in spite of Numeon's protestations, Guilliman sent out scores of legionaries and serfs to augment the search.

Beyond the Castrum's borders, a sizeable region in itself, the teeming millions of Magna Macragge Civitas awaited. Even during curfew, its roads and districts were thronged with those who had business out after dark. Labourers with petitions to operate within strict reconstruction perimeters; overseers cataloguing and domiciling fringe world refugees; troopers, both transhuman and human, returning from rotation were all at large in a dense, populous city.

From the Servian Wall to the Eastern Curtain and the coastal fringes of the Gulf of Lycum, a vast sprawl of land stretched in three cardinal directions. Time of discovery versus the last confirmed sighting of the primarch in state suggested some of these avenues of enquiry might not be necessary, but the longer it took to find him, the farther away Vulkan could potentially be taken. Therefore the possibility remained of an all-encompassing search of the entire Civitas.

Had his body been removed and hidden for some reason, it was unlikely

discovery would be expedient. A rationale for perpetrating such a heinous act was harder still to come by.

Theories that Curze had infiltrated the Castrum and his brother's resting place in order to defile it were swiftly rebuffed. Yet, there remained no answer as to how Vulkan's cold corpse could be absent after so long in state. Added to the fact that the casket in which he had lain was still sealed, and any explanation became inexplicable.

It bothered one Salamander more than the others.

Phaestus Var'kir had been to the memorial vault every day since Vulkan had been interred. He did so to minister to those who knelt in vigil or who had unanswered questions.

Even in light of recent events, he saw no reason to break with that routine.

His latest visit was not about solemn observance, though. Var'kir was trying to fathom the impossible.

The Salamander was not alone in that.

'What are you hoping to find?' asked a faintly resonant voice from the shadows.

Var'kir looked up from where he was kneeling, his face half lit by the still burning memorial flame.

'You are Titus Prayto,' Var'kir replied, prompting a short and shallow bow from the Ultramarine.

The Salamander rose to his feet. 'Not evidence, I am sure there is none of that.'

His psychic exertions still fading, Prayto nodded.

'I caught the faintest residual trace of the warp, but a Librarian is ever open to such things,' he said. 'I cannot be sure what it means, if it means anything at all.' His eyes narrowed. 'So, why are you here and not out scouring the Civitas?'

Var'kir was standing next to the casket and looked down into its empty confines. He laughed mirthlessly.

'I doubt my presence will tip the scales. I am looking for something, however. I came here hoping to find Numeon's belief, his certainty in Vulkan's resurrection.'

'And did you?'

Var'kir met the Librarian's questioning gaze.

'Did you see it?' he asked.

Prayto frowned, confused. 'See it?'

'Vulkan's healing, his return from death. Did you witness it? How did it happen? What was it like?'

Prayto shook his head, saying, ‘Not exactly. Valentus Dolor, Casmir and I… we became…’ he fought for the right word, ‘…*aware* of what was happening, and requested Lord Guilliman. You have to understand something, Phaestus,’ he said, and there was a note of caution in his tone. ‘When Vulkan arrived on Macragge, he *was* dead. Utterly. Not wounded. Not even close to death. Dead. An autopsy had been ordered, the primarch due for vivisection, when everything changed.’

Var’kir listened intently. No one amongst Guilliman’s inner circle had ever been so candid about the circumstances of Vulkan’s regeneration. His miracle.

‘Changed?’ asked the Salamander, in a half-rasp.

‘He lived. Breathing, flesh healing. All except one vital aspect had returned.’

Now Var’kir’s face darkened, as he related something he had heard.

‘His sanity.’

Prayto nodded sadly. ‘Yes. His mind was fractured. Raving. I tried to enter it, to find some means of reassembly, but it was like stepping into a sea of shards, the glass cutting at my mental flesh. I had to withdraw.’ He sounded apologetic.

Var’kir’s gaze fell again, as he unburdened a deep truth to Prayto that he never could to Zytos or Numeon.

‘I believe that Vulkan is dead, and I do not think he has walked from his tomb like some *faro* of Gyptus. I merely want to find him, and lay him to rest in the earth of Nocturne.’

A grief-stricken silence descended, awkward and painful. Wounds had been inflicted on the XVIII Legion, inadvertently by the XIII.

Titus Prayto now took it upon himself to try to salve some of them.

‘There is something you need to know,’ he said.

Var’kir’s gaze burned into him from the other side of the gilded casket.

Prayto did not flinch from it or what he knew he had to do.

‘It is your right as a Salamander.’

ELEVEN

Lead us

Magna Macragge Civitas, Heptapygion Fortress

Against all reason, a flicker of hope that had been dwindling since his arrival on Macragge began to rekindle within Numeon. Rumours persisted of the miraculous, the revivification of Vulkan. Raised in the cauldron of Nocturne, a crucible of fire, the inferno the Lord of Drakes had endured when breaching Macragge's atmosphere was another baptism.

'He will rise,' swore Numeon, but when no sign of the immortal primarch could be found, his at first indefatigable conviction began to fade.

Clad in scalloped war-plate befitting a centurion, the former captain of the Pyre Guard braced his gauntleted hands against the crenellated ramparts of the Heptapygion Fortress and looked out across the glittering azure ribbon of the Laponis.

The Heptapygion stood as a bulwark in the crook of two major arteries that flowed from the Gulf of Lycum and guarded the south-westerly approach into the Civitas.

A cold breeze was roiling off the sea, bringing with it the scent of brine. Rippling tides foamed against the rugged coastline as the rising swell hammered the natural barricade of the cliff face. In the harbour enclave, maritime vessels rocked uncertainly on churning waters.

Numeon felt that same discord within his gut.

Six days and the Lord of Drakes was still missing.

He gripped the sigil in his left hand, subconsciously willing it to surrender an answer. At the edge of his dark reverie, he heard booted footsteps.

'How have we not yet found him?' he asked simply.

Zytos joined him on the rampart.

'I have hunted on the Arridian Plain for days with barely any sight or sound of quarry,' Zytos replied, recalling what little time he had spent on Nocturne. He put a consoling hand on Numeon's shoulder which, for once, the other Salamander did not reject.

'At least you had some spoor to follow, a spur to your hope.'

Just over sixty Salamanders dwelled on Macragge, borne on the storm, the illumination of the Pharos their only beacon of hope amidst galactic darkness… until Numeon. His fervour and belief had ignited something, a flame thought extinguished.

Defeated, scattered, the pragmatic recourse would be to allow subsumption into the still fighting Legions. Numeon had shown them another path, one that saw them reunited with their father and errant brothers.

Every fire-born son on Macragge now trawled the labyrinthine Civitas, searching for any sign.

'You are our hope, brother,' Zytos said warmly, prompting Numeon to turn away from the bleak vista over the Laponis and face him. 'Vulkan lives.'

Smiling thinly, Numeon said, 'He lives, and he is here.'

Zytos gestured to the sigil Numeon was idly cradling.

'Is that…?' he ventured.

'From his armour, yes.'

'May I see it,' Zytos asked, 'just for a moment?'

Numeon handed over the hammer without hesitation.

'Neither a tool to forge with,' said Zytos, turning the sigil over in his burly hands, 'nor a weapon to kill his enemies.'

'It's a symbol,' Numeon told him, taking back the hammer as it was offered and returning it to the clasp on his belt.

Zytos nodded.

'Unto the anvil.'

'And soon, back into the fire,' Numeon replied.

Zytos regarded his brother's fresh-forged armour enviously. Drake-hide green, the scalloped edges overlapped in the manner of scales. The black-smiter who made it had engraved symbols of the flame into every plate to represent rebirth and the purpose that Numeon had rekindled in the Salamanders who had washed up on Macragge's planetary shores.

Incongruously, an Ultramarian blade swung lightly at the hip, albeit sheathed in a Nocturnean scabbard. The bolt pistol on the opposite hip and the serrated

sword on Numeon's back were both fire-born crafted.

The blade was a 'dragontooth', an old weapon since upgraded and refashioned for Legiones Astartes use. Each tooth was monomolecular-edged and thrice-folded during forging to increase hardness and durability. Affixed to a chain feed, they were deadly. Hefted by a decent swordsman, it had the sharpness to cut through battleplate.

Ubiquitous as the humble bolt pistol was in the ranks of the Legion, Numeon's inherited sidearm was a singular piece. Named *Basilysk* for its bronze-chased, serpent-headed muzzle, it had a wider gauge than standard Mars-pattern bolt pistols. This modification reduced effective range but dramatically increased stopping power, and as such required specialised shells.

'Gargo did a fine job on your armour.'

'He said he was rushed but I am in his debt, and yours and Var'kir's for the weapons. Know they shall be returned to you once there is time enough for forging again.'

'A weapon given is a gift, brother-captain,' said Zytos. 'I could no more take back my arm should I give it unto you. Both are yours now.'

'Then you have my gratitude, brother,' Numeon replied graciously.

Zytos gave a short, humble bow.

'An honour.'

'Does the blade answer to a name?'

'*Draukoros,*' Zytos replied, 'in honour of the beast whose teeth make up its killing edge.'

'It is much vaunted then. It reminds me how much I miss the presence of Skaltareth.' Numeon had worn the mantle of the great drake since becoming fire-born. Its loss felt like a piece of him had been cruelly excised.

Zytos smiled, an expression that came easily to the immense Themian. 'Then we shall find another beast for you to flay.'

His face grew serious and he looked about to say more when he averted his gaze to the horizon.

'Say it,' Numeon said firmly.

'Why won't you speak to them?' asked Zytos, meeting his brother eye to eye.

'I am not their leader, Zytos. Vulkan is, and he will be with us again soon. Besides,' offered Numeon, 'you have led these warriors proudly in the absence of any other.'

'Brother, it is not–'

'Brothers!'

A voice from behind Zytos interrupted, catching the attention of both Salamanders.

Var'kir was ascending the stairway of smoothed grey basalt to the rampart.

'I may have learned of a way to find our father,' he said, his old eyes squinting in the dying light of the sun.

Numeon's tone betrayed the desperation he had been hiding from Zytos.

'Tell us.'

TWELVE

Blood rites

Magna Macragge Civitas, Eastern Keep

Xenut Sul had been chained before being taken to his cell in the Eastern Keep. As the door slammed shut, darkness engulfed him. It was a dungeon, one of several in the bastion. Not a prison exactly, but with enough secure rooms to hold the captured enemies of the Ultramarines.

His cell was on the northern side of the keep, several levels down from the summit where he had been brought in via gunship. Xenut Sul assumed the casket he had been incarcerated in was meant to make the sons of Guilliman feel safe. This chamber, with its adamantium fetters, its ferrocrete walls and reinforced iron-bound door, achieved a similar purpose.

It was a falsehood, of course.

No room, no locked and barred dungeon or oubliette, could imprison Xenut Sul. The enterprising Ultramarines had overreached themselves, just as his master said they would. They did not fully comprehend what manner of entity they had placed within their midst.

Nor would they. Xenut Sul had seen to that, hiding his psychic spoor to avoid detection. They would learn soon enough, but by then the time for that being useful information would have lapsed.

A shame then, Xenut Sul reflected, that he was not here on Macragge, in this exact place, to kill Ultramarines.

His prey was of a different persuasion.

Traitors, he mused as he slipped effortlessly from his bonds, came in many varied stripes. His limbs grew nubile as the bones holding his flesh together lengthened and slid through manacles meant for a warrior in solid battleplate.

His body distorted as if stretched, like a reflection in a wyrd-mirror. Back arching, neck extending, Xenut Sul contorted skin and bone, and eased loose of his chains like a viper altering its shape to penetrate the tightest of confines.

Shedding his armour, the reptile now denuding its scales, Xenut Sul crouched in the half-dark and listened.

Footsteps receded against the hard slabs of the corridor adjacent to his cell, telling him the gaolers had since departed. There were other guards, he could scent them patrolling, but they were relatively far off.

A thin shaft of light spilling both under the door and limning the minuscule crack delineating its vision slit betrayed no lingering presence just beyond the threshold. It was not unknown for gaolers to wait quietly in the gloom to see what their prisoners might do or say when they thought they were alone.

Xenut Sul knew he had value, otherwise he would be dead. But he suspected he was also not the most vaunted commodity in the custody of the Ultramarines. That dubious honour went to another.

'I shall silence him,' Xenut Sul hissed to the dark, but not only to the dark…

Holding his right hand into the grainy light, a long talon extended from his index finger. It grew until it had curled into a sharp, barbed tip, at which point Xenut Sul drew it gently down his left forearm.

Skin and flesh parted easily enough, then a deeper subdermal layer. A substance akin to blood trickled out, viscous and flowing with sentient anima. Pooling at Xenut Sul's bare feet, it congealed into the simulacrum of a skull. Dark fluid ran unabated from Xenut Sul's arteries, like the exsanguination of a corpse by a mortician's catheter, layering the bone edges of the skull then transforming it into flesh. Definition followed with the simulation of skin, hair, even the tattooed runes across the face that now resembled the Preacher's visage.

As if rising from deep water, in this instance a blood-red well, the waxen face gasped for breath. 'Waking' into Xenut Sul's chamber, the 'Preacher' Quor Gallek regarded the Unburdened with solemn eyes.

'*Speak*...' The bloodied visage spoke with Xenut Sul's voice, albeit a rasping, deathly approximation, its lips and that of the Unburdened moving synchronously with every word. '*We do not have long.*'

Xenut Sul smiled, despite the strain of communion. Witnessing the suffering of the preacher salved some of his discomfort.

'He is here,' Xenut Sul whispered, 'just as Barbos Kha and Ulkas Tul described.'

Dredging their soulless matter from where it burned in the ether had been worth

the trouble. Eternal agony awaited them now, a fair price for betrayal… even of a betrayer.

‘*Do Guilliman’s sons suspect?*’

‘Neither my true form nor mission.’

‘*Can you get close enough?*’

Xenut Sul scoffed, ‘This cell is no impediment.’

‘*What did you offer for your capture?*’

‘Your name, the promise of something further so they would keep me alive. You were right that the blacksmith’s totem would call out to them.’

Quor Gallek smiled with ophidian threat, but his time within communion drew short. He snarled, exerting his will to stay bonded a little longer.

‘*Kill him, Xenut Sul,*’ he said, Xenut Sul’s lips mimicking the bloody simulacra. ‘*Wrench every morsel of truth from your torturing of his soul and then cast his essence into the warp. I have promised a feast. Then the next act can begin…*’

Xenut Sul nodded, eyes vital with malice.

‘The fulgurite,’ he uttered, as if to confirm the prize that awaited them.

‘*God-killer… a weapon that can slay a primarch… even the Emperor…*’ Agony contorting his features into a grimace, Quor Gallek sloughed away skin, flesh and bone until only formless blood remained.

Xenut Sul sagged with exertion, but his eagerness was undiminished.

‘I will flense your dirty little soul,’ he promised to the dark, but not only to the dark, ‘Barthusa Narek.’

THIRTEEN

A bloody reunion

Magna Macragge Civitas, Eastern Keep

A Thunderhawk, hastily summoned, conveyed the Salamanders from the Heptapygion Fortress to the Eastern Keep. They landed amidst squalls of rising dust and some alarm, given the suddenness of their arrival.

Before the cobalt blue-clad guards could intercede against the three draconic legionaries, who leapt eagerly from the gaping side hatch of the gunship, Aeonid Thiel and Vitus Inviglio emerged from the depths of the bastion to act as escort.

Both were armed, but their weapons were slung and sheathed.

Thiel raised his left hand, palm outwards to the Salamanders.

'Slowly,' he warned. 'This is precisely why you weren't told.'

Zytos was first to reply, his anger getting the better of him.

'Our father's murderer is in one of your cells, and you did not see fit to tell us. We have been in the city for months!'

Var'kir defused the situation before Thiel had to.

'Be calm, Zytos. You forget your blood.'

'It flows like magma through my veins, Chaplain,' he replied, teeth clenched.

Numeon ignored them both, instead meeting face to face with Thiel.

'Var'kir and I will go with you,' he told the Ultramarine. 'I will see the traitor known as Barthusa Narek now. We have history, he and I. A lot of legionaries are dead because of him.'

Thiel didn't move. Neither did Zytos, despite Numeon's pronouncement, which said a lot about the Salamanders captain's charisma and influence with the rest of the XVIII. It struck Thiel in that moment that bereft of their primarch, Artellus Numeon was Legion Master in all but name.

He said nothing of these thoughts, stating instead, ‘I do not have sanction to allow you to kill him, Artellus. Much as I would like to let you.’

‘I give you my solemn word,’ Numeon replied, laying his clenched fist across his breast in the style of the Ultramarines.

Thiel paused, assessing the threat evident in both Salamanders. It was a habit he could not shake, even around allies.

Finding no reason to doubt or perhaps not really caring to, he nodded to Inviglio, who quickly ushered the tense-looking guards aside.

‘When we enter the Eastern Keep,’ Thiel told them as they followed Inviglio, ‘you follow my exact word, and do not deviate from it.’

Numeon’s face was unreadable. ‘Understood.’

Var’kir quietly nodded.

The four legionaries passed through the gate and into the keep. Like a statue of onyx, Zytos dutifully waited for them outside. He seethed with anger, but quickly realised this was precisely why Numeon had left him behind.

The bowels of the Eastern Keep were deep and went down into the bedrock of Macragge. Here, Thiel told them, was where they were holding Barthusa Narek. Other prisoners were also incarcerated within the bastion, but none had been held as long as this particular Word Bearer.

‘I have summoned Titus Prayto,’ said Thiel as the four walked in near lockstep down stout corridors of steel and stone. ‘Though I suspect he is already well aware of your presence.’ He cast a quick glance in Var’kir’s direction, who had the good grace not to deny it.

‘How did you get him to tell you?’ Thiel asked, his eyes fixed ahead again.

‘He offered without need of request.’

Thiel nodded, approving.

‘Has the traitor been interrogated?’ asked Numeon.

‘Vigorously,’ said Thiel, ‘to the point of it no longer being useful.’

Var’kir laughed as they descended, first steps and then onto an open-caged platform that would ferry them part of the way.

‘For an Ultramarine, you are surprisingly… liberated.’

‘So I am often told.’

‘I imagine it is not always to your benefit.’

‘You’d be right.’

On the way to the lifter, Thiel acknowledged every guard they passed, all of whom saluted in turn. Each was a legionary, for no other warriors could be

trusted to secure the prisoners within.

Once everyone was aboard, Inviglio activated the lifter.

'This will convey us part of the way down,' he explained, 'but Barthusa Narek's cell is subterranean. The rest of the way will be on foot.'

Numeon didn't answer. He appeared insular, marshalling his resolve for a reunion with the Vigilator who slew Helon, Uzak, Shaka and Pergellen on Traoris. The last death Numeon could not be sure of, but he quietly murmured the Iron Hands legionary's name to himself in a mantra just like he did the others.

'Artellus,' said Thiel as the lifter ground to a clanking halt. Chains rattled and the settling metal groaned as the carriage hit solid ground.

'*Artellus,*' he repeated, more firmly.

Numeon looked at him.

'I made a solemn vow,' said the Salamander. 'I won't break it. I won't kill him… not yet.'

Inviglio appeared anxious, glancing at his sergeant for reassurance.

After a few seconds, Thiel shrugged, yanking back the concertina gate that had closed off the lifter cage during the descent.

'Then that'll have to be good enough.'

Inviglio led. They followed.

A flight of narrow steps took them downwards. Worn stone, flickering firelight reaching from sconces on the walls – it had the grim aspect of the ancient. Perhaps Narek would be tied to the rack or hanging from a gibbet.

After the second stairwell, Thiel's vox-feed crackled. He paused, signalling for the others to do the same, then bade the speaker on the other end to report.

He listened, while the others waited. When Thiel was done, he shut down the feed and drew his bolt pistol.

So did Inviglio.

'What is it?' asked Var'kir.

Numeon unsheathed the Ultramarian gladius at his hip. Neither Thiel nor Inviglio tried to stop him, or protest.

'He's loose, isn't he?'

Thiel scowled. 'There are six guards below,' he said. 'Ultramarines. Our brothers. None have reported in.'

'There's something else too,' said Var'kir, unhitching a dragon-headed mace from his belt. 'Can't you smell it?'

He paused a beat for the others to catch up.

‘It’s blood.’

Inviglio found the first body. Slumped against an alcove, outside one of the lower cells, the Ultramarine’s throat had been torn out.

He knew of only one thing that could inflict such a wound. Kneeling beside the corpse, checking in vain for vital signs, Inviglio turned to Thiel.

‘Unburdened.’

Twice now, Inviglio had fought them. It seemed he was destined to do so a third time.

‘Are we to be forever blighted by such creatures?’ he said, uttering the thought aloud.

Thiel didn’t answer, but looked grim. He holstered his pistol and drew both his close-combat weapons instead. One was a finely wrought longsword, which hummed as he fed power to the blade. The other was a short, stabbing gladius, a replacement for the one he had given to Numeon.

‘Is he a daemon?’ Thiel asked the Salamanders flatly. ‘Narek – is his flesh possessed? That is what it means among the Word Bearers to be Unburdened. To be bereft of your soul.’

Numeon gave a subtle shake of the head.

‘I believe some of his allies on Traoris were *touched*. But him… I don’t know.’

‘There’s more,’ said Var’kir, having moved to investigate the open cell. ‘Here.’

Within lingered a second legionary. Also dead, but clad in dirty white and blue. Like the slain Ultramarine, the World Eater’s end had been messy. Blood and viscera painted the walls.

Inviglio got to his feet and drew his sword. Thiel’s scowl deepened as he regarded the corpse. He took the lead.

‘Stay close.’

Three further cells lay open on the way to where Barthusa Narek was being held, their occupants butchered. One had been ripped apart, his limbs scattered like chaff during a red harvest. Another hung by a noose of entrails. Of the third victim, nothing remained but a pool of congealed blood.

Guards torn apart and slain worsened the grisly vista. Taken by surprise, some had failed even to draw a weapon. In the lowest subterranean level of the bastion there was evidence of bolter shell damage to the walls and legionaries who had fought and died, instead of being slaughtered at their posts.

No alarm had been raised, no warning given. The prison massacre had happened quickly.

‘There is more to this than we are seeing,’ said Numeon as they neared the last cell and Barthusa Narek.

‘Agreed,’ Thiel replied, gesturing to the obvious.

A long corridor led to the deepest, darkest hole in the keep. It had a mild slope. Spilled blood slowly trickled down it, as if leading them. The air was thick, warm and metallic on the tongue.

‘What do you see?’ Numeon asked.

‘An end to interrogating prisoners on Macragge,’ said Inviglio.

Thiel slowed almost imperceptibly, a theoretical forming.

‘A trail.’

‘That leads to Narek’s cell.’ Numeon jutted his chin towards it.

They ran. Their heavy boots hammered loudly down the corridor.

Thiel found the cell already unlocked, and muttered, ‘Every door, a new horror…’

Then he kicked the door wide open.

A legionary clad in crimson plate stood before them, obscured by shadows and with his head bowed. The interruption made him straighten, as if ending a conversation more abruptly than he wanted to, but there was no one else in the chamber.

‘Believe it or not,’ said the figure, ‘this isn’t how I wanted matters to play out.’

Thiel took three slow steps inside, checking his flanks for any sign of ambush.

‘Narek of the Word,’ he declared calmly to the warrior’s back once he was inside. ‘You will face a reckoning for this.’

Numeon had moved up to his left, Inviglio his right. Var’kir guarded the door to prevent the traitor’s escape.

As the Word Bearer lifted his head, Numeon’s grip on the gladius tightened.

‘You are not Barthusa Narek,’ he said, as he recognised the traitor’s face. ‘Where is he?’

The Word Bearer frowned. ‘Isn’t that the very question,’ said Xenut Sul, before he attacked.

Xenut Sul was fast, faster than any legionary wearing battleplate had a right to be. But he was not a legionary, not in the truest sense. Strictly speaking, he was not even a man.

Thiel leapt aside as the Unburdened came at them, scattering the warriors and smashing Var’kir through the open cell and back out into the corridor. Xenut Sul then wheeled around, ignoring the prostrate Salamander incapacitated behind him, and turned on the others.

It was obvious now that escape had never been Xenut Sul's intention. He had failed in whatever mission he had been given and now it would end in blood.

A transformation had begun to take place in Xenut Sul. He appeared larger, stronger, his armour straining to contain his bulk. His nails pierced the fingertips of his gauntlets, protruding in dagger-length talons. Once-human eyes became fathomless pools of black, glinting like oil in the half-light.

For a moment, they held the legionaries in thrall…

…until Thiel cried out.

'Kill it!'

He hacked off Xenut Sul's hand at the wrist as it reached to choke him, eliciting a grunt of pain from the Unburdened. Fleshy tendrils spewed eagerly from the stump, thrashing with unnatural vigour. One coiled around Thiel's outstretched leg and hurled him across the cell. He hit the wall hard, cracking ceramite, and stayed prone. The other two tendrils struck Inviglio hard in the chest like a clenched fist and sent him sprawling.

Unsheathing *Draukoros* from his back, with the gladius in his other hand, Numeon stood his ground. His voice echoed around the small chamber.

'Vulkan lives!'

Xenut Sul laughed, an ugly discordant noise that gnawed at Numeon's nerves. Mutating rapidly, the tendrils had entwined into a bulbous mace of flesh. The Word Bearer swung it like a wrecking ball, caving in parts of the cell wall, ripping out chunks of stone and filling the air with dust, narrowly missing the Salamander's head as he ducked.

Numeon lunged and met unyielding ceramite. Parrying a thrust of Xenut Sul's claws, but holding position, he lunged again. He found a gap, the straining plate ill-suited to protecting Xenut Sul's expanding musculature. Skin and dermis parted, releasing a spurt of vitae.

Xenut Sul roared.

At least they now knew they could hurt it.

Leaving his gladius impaled in the Unburdened's chest, Numeon cleaved into Xenut Sul's shoulder with *Draukoros.* It sank deep, greedily chewing flesh, echoing what the teeth would have done during life. Numeon drew the blade back and forth, sawing. His armour was spattered with vile gore. Not blood, nothing so mundane as that, but an ichorous substitute. It stank, threatening to overpower the Salamander with its sheer foulness.

This was the taint of the warp, the reek of what lay beyond the veil, the corruption in men's souls and the putrefaction of fell deeds given form and

sentience.

Numeon wished bitterly that he had a flamer to burn this wretched thing back to its hell, but would make do with the sword.

'Bites hard, like my anger,' he snarled as the serrated teeth met bone and snagged.

Crazed with agony, Xenut Sul heaved Numeon up off his feet and crushed him against the partially destroyed cell wall, but the Salamander held on grimly. He left *Draukoros* deeply embedded but wrenched out the gladius with two hands and stabbed down into Xenut Sul's exposed neck.

It sank to the hilt, Numeon's gauntlets slick and dark.

The Unburdened recoiled, staggering backwards, and Numeon fell as he was released. He caught hold of the serrated sword's grip, and his momentum dragged it loose, razor teeth clogged with ruddy flesh.

Inviglio recovered fast and was back on his feet. Numeon caught sight of the Ultramarine in his peripheral vision, but his relief turned to horror as Xenut Sul reacted faster. The Unburdened turned on Inviglio, who stalled momentarily as he recalled Leargus split in two aboard the *Dark Sacrament.*

Xenut Sul wrenched every scrap of memory from him.

'It was no way for a warrior to die,' he hissed and punched the talons of his remaining hand through Inviglio's undefended chest. The Ultramarine gurgled, small air bubbles of blood bursting through his vox-grille before his blades slipped loose and he sagged, impaled on Xenut Sul's knife-talons.

Fuelled by a desire for vengeance, Numeon surged to his feet, but Xenut Sul already had his measure too.

Choking tendrils whipped viperously around the Salamander's neck, constricting his throat. Black oblivion crowded his vision before Numeon hacked the tendrils apart with a tired but heavy blow. He gagged, fetching up bile that he spewed down his chin.

Xenut Sul's frenzied counter hammered him to his knees. The clattering reply of *Draukoros* spilling from Numeon's loose grip was like a death knell.

They had hurt the Unburdened, wounded it deeply, but it wasn't dead. That only increased its lethality, a beast cornered and fighting for survival.

'I will not stop until every legionary in this hole is dead,' it declared in a bestial voice. 'No amount of death will sate me!'

Blood flowed from his nose and mouth, and the dull pain of several fractures in his rib shell and right shoulder were burning for his attention, but Numeon looked up into the face of his attacker.

Xenut Sul's gaze was pitiless. And though his mass and limbs were grotesque, the warrior's face still looked much as it had. Not a man at all, Numeon reminded himself. A *daemon.*

With one hand braced against the floor to support his weight, Numeon reached for a weapon with his other. He still had *Basilysk* tucked in its holster, but instead his fingers touched the haft of the sigil and clenched around it as though it were the tether of his mortal thread.

In the old beliefs, those that pre-dated the Emperor's age of enlightenment and scientific endeavour, superstition had power. Belief, it was said, could summon the miraculous. Faith in something greater, something pure, when espoused by a pious man could become a sword against Old Night.

Numeon did not believe in all the myths of ancient Nocturne, but he believed in Vulkan and brandished the primarch's sigil like a purifying flame.

The significance of the deed and the moment was not lost on him, and he roared defiantly, 'Vulkan lives!'

As he caught sight of the sigil, Xenut Sul froze. Just as it had with poor Inviglio, it proved a crucial hesitation.

Three hard, percussive bangs echoed thunderously around the cell, jerking Xenut Sul's malformed body as the mass-reactives embedded within him exploded.

Snarling from the impacts, the Word Bearer was wrenched from his trance to confront his attackers.

Zytos, Var'kir and the two Ultramarines from the guardhouse had unslung bolters aimed at the Unburdened.

'Down!' shouted Zytos.

With what little strength he still had, Numeon hurled his body aside as a storm of shells struck Xenut Sul. Chunks of flesh, bone and armour plate were blasted off the Unburdened. Xenut Sul staggered against the intense fusillade but survived.

Thronged with smoke and the reek of cordite, the air carried Xenut Sul's mocking laughter as his flesh began to reknit.

Zytos wasn't done. 'Reload!'

Bracing himself for another salvo, Xenut Sul shaped to charge the warriors laying down fire from the corridor.

Thiel was back on his feet.

The electromagnetic longsword crackled in his fist.

'Let's try that again,' he told the abomination, 'for Inviglio,' and jammed the

blade right where Xenut Sul's heart should be.

A second hail of shells struck the Unburdened. Xenut Sul thrashed and spat, cursing as he was slowly torn asunder.

As the shell storm abated, Numeon staggered to his feet. He was hurt, but had enough strength left to finish it.

'You are weak,' he said, wielding *Draukoros* again, 'because you are impure. You just don't have the wit to see it. I will show you…'

He swung the sword.

Xenut Sul's eyes widened, his all too human face contorted with fear as Numeon decapitated him.

Headless, Xenut Sul's corpse slumped to its knees and fell forwards.

'Throne, he was an ugly bastard,' spat Thiel, wiping the gory blade of his deactivated longsword. He spared a glance for Inviglio. Not the first of the Red-marked he had lost, but every one hurt like a knife in his own flesh.

'We have to lock down the Eastern Keep,' said Numeon.

'For what good it will do,' said Thiel, but nodded to the two Ultramarines from the guardhouse to do just that.

Numeon uttered aloud what they were all thinking.

'Barthusa Narek is gone, and not by the hand of the enemy.'

FOURTEEN

Closing ranks

Magna Macragge Civitas, 'Ash Quarter'

Darkness filled the sword hall, abject but for tiny islands of quietly crackling firelight. Grey ash gathered at the foot of braziers, both mere flakes of wood and a burnt offering. Even the air was black, thronged with soot and the sharp reek of cinder. Heat thickened the atmosphere, haze vibrated the shadows and a stifling pall lay over the gathering.

There were sixty-six of them, huddled together in the gloom. Shoulders hunched, hulking in their deep green plate, their eyes burned with ember-like brightness. Skin blacker than sackcloth, enduring as onyx, they looked diabolic and the citizens of the Civitas had wisely stayed away.

Formerly part of a district, the sword hall and some of its surroundings now belonged to those born of fire. They had claimed it, the sixty-six, not through violence or direct intimidation, merely by occupancy and the strange nature of their customs. Some amongst the natives of Macragge now called it the 'Ash Quarter'.

Rek'or Xathen took a long pull of his *rhaga* pipe, exhaling clinker-redolent smoke as he asked, 'Do we even have a ship?'

'The *Charybdis* awaits in dock.'

Xathen's hard eyes found Gargo amongst the other Salamanders. He scowled, unintentionally emphasising the facial scar that ran diagonally across his face. Xathen was a Pyroclast, one of the few. He was volatile before the massacre; now he always bordered on eruption, or so Var'kir had often remarked.

'That piece of *sked*? It's a wonder it made it back from Isstvan V. How's it going to get us through the Ruinstorm?'

Igen Gargo had a fine salting of alabaster-white hair. His thin beard ran in a stripe down his chin. Short, he was nonetheless strong, with the heavy shoulders of a black-smiter. Folding his arms, he looked even more compact and formidable.

'Ship's sound,' he said, 'and has a strong master. Adyssian says it'll endure. I believe him.'

Xathen snorted, unimpressed. 'You spend overlong with the humans.'

'They're our kin, Xathen,' warned Var'kir, mildly remonstrating the veteran. 'And we must trust them, or trust no one.' His black armour blended almost seamlessly with his flesh, so that he was nearly invisible but for the burning coals of his fire-red sclera and the white crest of hair that bifurcated his skull. He looked tired after his recent encounter with the Unburdened Xenut Sul.

'Have you seen it in the flame, Chaplain?' asked Gargo, eager to hear of any premonition.

Even in the esoteric Promethean Cult, such practices were rarely conducted any more. Few thought it in keeping with the secular galaxy the Imperium had attempted to establish.

Of late, however, superstition and the old ways were staging a revival.

'No,' Var'kir admitted, and his expression darkened, 'but there is much I have missed recently.' This time his frustration at the escape of Barthusa Narek played heavily across his features.

There was a notable omission at the table, an empty seat. None gathered in the sword hall would look upon it, though the one alongside this vacancy now stood.

Zytos braced his gauntleted hands against the heavy lacquered wood and the table groaned against his weight, despite its ostensible sturdiness.

'Listen,' said Zytos, a sergeant by rank but much more than that to the gathered survivors who had washed up at Ultramar. 'Var'kir is right. Our allies here are few, we know that now. Vulkan gone, the traitor fled – there is little to keep us on Macragge.' The firelight flickered against his tough, ebon features, emphasising his youth and the baldness of his scalp. 'We are the Pyre, and we must endure… for Vulkan.'

These words prompted a murmured echo from the others. Notably, Xathen abstained, his red eyes burning into Zytos as he listened.

'I believe Igen Gargo when he says the *Charybdis* is ready. And I have met Kolo Adyssian and found him honest and brave. We could not want for a finer shipmaster. Far'kor Zonn agrees with me, also.'

Here, Zytos glanced to the Techmarine, who nodded and briefly set the gyros in

his mechanised neck whirring.

'A decision then lies before us,' Zytos said, casting his gaze around the entire shadowed assembly. 'We can stay, and become a part of Guilliman's new crusade–'

'A political appointment, and no more than that,' Xathen snorted, but found most in agreement. 'I have no wish for what few Salamanders remain to be part of some symbolic propaganda for Macragge.'

'Nor I,' said Abidemi.

'Or I,' echoed Dakar.

Other voices joined them. Only Var'kir and Zonn kept quiet.

Zytos nodded at the sudden groundswell, satisfied, determined.

'Then we leave, and join up with whoever still fights for the Throne beyond Ultramar's borders.'

'A third choice exists,' said Var'kir as the tumult of vengeful voices faded.

All eyes fell upon him, fiery in the shadows.

'Nocturne,' he uttered simply.

Xathen frowned; his eagerness for retribution against the traitors edged towards belligerence, even amongst brothers. 'Nocturne? Through the storm, a journey that perilous? I want to die in battle, not aboard a battered warhorse vessel straining to reach home.'

'For Vulkan,' Var'kir replied, and the mood fell back to sombre reflection.

'Vulkan is gone,' said Xathen, as grief-stricken as the rest but choosing to deal with it through anger and recrimination. 'Ash and smoke, you said so yourself, Chaplain.'

'Numeon believes,' said Zytos, attracting Xathen's ire.

'All I know of Artellus Numeon is he was once a great warrior.'

Gargo interrupted, speaking through clenched teeth. 'He still is, brother.' He grimaced, and suddenly clenched his shoulder.

'Still hurts, eh?' said Xathen, unable to fetter his natural belligerence. 'We all lost something on Isstvan, though, didn't we.'

There were nods at that. Gargo averted his gaze from the Pyroclast, and took the pain.

'Numeon is also our leader, in the absence of any other,' said Var'kir, turning back to the matter at hand. He gave a quick glance to the slightly crestfallen Zytos.

'A leader who does not want to lead,' Xathen replied. Swinging his arms wide, he gestured expansively to the others. 'And where is he? Our strength gathers,

trying to determine our best fate and he is not to be found. Only an empty seat to remind us of his absence.'

Igen Gargo retreated from the argument. A murmur of dissenting voices ebbed until all were silent.

Even Zytos had no answer. Though there was honour in leading his brothers, and part of him would miss that, he had rejoiced when Numeon had come back to them to take up the fallen mantle of Legion Master.

Var'kir had will enough to challenge the scarred veteran.

'He grieves, Xathen. That's where he is. Mourning the dead.'

FIFTEEN

Lost causes

Magna Macragge Civitas, Memorial Gardens

Var'kir had called them gardens, but Numeon saw no beauty in them. Between the daemons fought in the bowels of the Eastern Keep and the empty memorial vault meant to contain his father, he had seen precious little beauty anywhere on Macragge.

Instead, he saw granite and cold marble across a bleak expanse of dark turf threaded with black orchids and pale lilies. Inner peace was a stranger to this auditorium of grief and pain. Tombs and mausoleums stretched in every direction. Great statues loomed, forever clad in funerary armour, held fast in their finest moments of fading glory.

A cold wind blew through this place of the dead, disturbing stone-clad trenches of dank water. It numbed Numeon's soul and stabbed his heart with ice.

'I am a wraith,' he murmured to the other revenants, 'standing alone in your long shadows.'

'Bleak words for bleak environs,' uttered a deep, sibilant voice.

Numeon drew his sword. 'Who goes there?' he demanded, recalling Thiel's words about doppelgangers and renegades abroad in the Civitas.

A tall, powerful figure emerged from the darkness, as grim and forbidding in his black armour as any chiselled memorial statue. It could be none other.

'I am Lion El'Jonson.'

'I know who you are,' Numeon replied, lowering his sword. 'The Lion, primarch of the Dark Angels.'

Hooded eyes regarded Numeon, framed by a mane of long blond hair. The primarch towered over the Salamander, his mood and his manner inscrutable.

He proffered his gauntleted hand.

'Consider this a formal introduction then,' said the Lion. 'I wanted to speak to the Legion Master of the Salamanders alone.'

'I have no claim to that title.'

'Yours is the only claim, captain.'

'Then I do not wish for it. What is it you want from me, lord?'

The Lion lowered his hand, his face unreadable.

'Just your ear,' he said, stepping back towards the shadows.

A huge wing-hilted blade hung across his back, mercifully undrawn.

'You have it,' said Numeon, somewhat wary.

'You disagree with the policies here on Macragge, do you, Numeon?'

'I have no mind for them, right now. I came here to be alone.'

'With your grief? Your anger?'

'Both. Either. What does it matter to the Lord of the Dark Angels?'

'I am just intrigued. Confronted by a legionary who aches to return to his world, I wonder, Numeon, what is that feeling like?'

'Desperate, asphyxiating. Is that what you expected?'

'It isn't,' admitted the Lion. 'Is it merely the pull of Nocturne or does something else compel you?'

'Am I pushed from Macragge, is that what you're asking?'

The Lion paused to consider his answer. 'Not exactly that. Not Macragge.'

'Then you mean Lord Guilliman's ideal.'

The Lion said nothing, but Numeon felt himself under sudden scrutiny. The Salamander narrowed his eyes.

'You don't agree with it.'

Again, the Lion kept his own counsel.

'I don't wish to become a political pawn in whatever is happening here. I have even less tolerance for it than Sergeant Thiel.'

'Many feel as you do,' the primarch uttered finally. 'Some say we were too quick to give up on Terra. I believe you are someone who does not give up on lost causes easily either. Our lost causes are sometimes all we have to strive for.'

Numeon gave a short, bitter laugh.

'Look around us, my lord. We are amongst graves. Do you think I came here because my faith in *lost causes* is strong?'

The Lion shook his head, saying, 'I meant no disrespect, but be mindful of who you are speaking to.' There was warning in his tone, exacerbated by the mail and plate he wore, and the great sword strapped to his back. Deeper shadows abided

within the furred cloak arrayed about his shoulders, suggesting the Lion's enigmatic and capricious nature.

For the first time since the conversation began, Numeon had reason to be concerned.

'I came here to mourn,' he said, contrite. 'For peace.'

Bowing, the Lion answered, 'Then I shall trouble you no further. But remember what I said, Numeon. None of us will give up on our causes.'

'And what of Caliban then?'

A slight tremor of unease crossed the Lion's face, so quick and so subtle it could almost have been Numeon's imagination. Almost.

'Mourn for my brother Vulkan, as I shall,' said the primarch, retreating into shadow and the deeper groves of the gardens, 'but don't expect to find peace.'

He sounded bitter, but before Numeon could ask why, the Lion turned and his long cloak swept around in his wake. Then he was gone, lost to the dark.

Numeon stood alone for a few moments. He hadn't realised how fast his heart was beating. The encounter with the Lion was both unexpected and disturbing. He found himself wondering at the Dark Angel's agenda. His words rang true.

Our lost causes, Numeon realised, *are sometimes all we have to strive for.*

His purpose here returned to him, his grief and anguish also. After so long in denial, he had finally come to accept the irrefutable.

Vulkan was gone.

His father had not escaped his casket to walk amongst the living again; his form had dissipated back into the ash of its creation. Even his murderer had inexplicably slipped his shackles and, despite all the assurances he had heard second-hand from Guilliman, Numeon held little hope Barthusa Narek would be apprehended. With Sanguinius and the Lion by his side, despite his curious misgivings, the Lord of Macragge was more concerned with building his war machine, his legacy and the Ultramar second front than he was about errant traitors, even ones as high profile as the Vigilator.

No hope, no vengeance.

'I have been denied everything,' he hissed, bitterly.

Perhaps he should seek out the Lion and speak with him further? For now, he was ill-prepared for such a conversation. He needed time.

Stepping through an ivy-strangled arch, Numeon found himself upon a stairway of black basalt leading up to a stone plateau at its summit. In the middle of the plateau was a memorial stone. Here were etched the names of those who had died on Isstvan V. There were many gaps, many names yet to be spoken, many

of the dead still to be confirmed.

Another monument rose above this first memorial, a golden and glorious statue of Ferrus Manus, primarch of the Iron Hands.

Carven in a belligerent aspect, he clenched a massive hammer in his outstretched hand and held it aloft as if to challenge the heavens. Rendered in agonising exactness, his war-plate almost transcended stone in its verisimilitude. The artisan had sculpted severe features for the Gorgon – an unyielding, defiant expression that dared all who looked upon it not to feel humbled even by his simulacrum. Dead eyes, blank of the primarch's infamous temper, stared down upon Numeon.

It was a bleak epitaph, he decided, ill-fitting of such a formidable being.

But how else could the dead be remembered, other than by having their essence trapped in stone? Ferrus Manus would have raged at such poor treatment.

Numeon laughed grimly, imagining it. Then he looked beyond the statue, further into the memorial gardens.

Here the foliage gave way entirely to dark marble. No tree or leaf grew in this lightless quarter, only skull-wreathed columns that had erupted from the ground like tumours. Lesser statues rose between them, some in repose upon their tombs, others standing proudly, their bodies interred in the earth below.

As Numeon left the statue, descending from the plateau to walk between the structures of dark marble, his grief found him.

Falling to one knee as if struck, he wept for his slain father. None would see it, for he was alone in his misery.

In his mind's eye, a great pyre burned. Upon it was Vulkan, returned to the flame at last.

'Embers,' hissed Numeon, finding his composure but still bent on one knee, his head bowed in sufferance. 'That is all we are, and all we can become in the end.'

Finding enough resolve to raise his head, he noticed one of the statues regarding him from the shadows. Sitting sternly on a marble throne set upon a shallow plinth, the statue struck Numeon as familiar.

He got to his feet, eyes straining against the darkness, but the statue was too far away to discern in detail.

As Numeon approached it, his armoured boots rang loudly against the marble but he did not hear them. His every sense was transfixed upon the enthroned figure.

As he drew nearer, he noticed something clenched against its chest and then he saw what was also jutting from it.

Numeon's tongue was stolen away, his eyes widening, his mouth trying to form words but failing. He managed one just before he sank to his knees again.

'Father…'

SIXTEEN

Severed ties

Cruiser Monarchia*, the shrine*

Severance was painful. Blood rites took their toll on the flesh. In a crude way that failed to appreciate the complexities of their metaphysics, that is how they *functioned.*

Quor Gallek had been blood-tithed to the Unburdened when it was banished. Not in actual communion, for such a feat was beyond even a Dark Apostle of his considerable dedication and ability, but rather a perpetual latent awareness. During the tithing, several revelations had emerged.

Barthusa Narek was no longer incarcerated. Another 'interested party' had freed him for reasons as yet unknown. The identities of these apparent allies was also obscure. Sadly, his whereabouts on Macragge were currently unknown too.

Before banishment, Xenut Sul had revealed something else.

Against all odds, Vulkan had arrived on Macragge some time ago.

Lying in state, his obsidian flesh now acted as a sheath for the fulgurite.

'Xenut Sul,' murmured Quor Gallek, wiping blood from his nose and spitting up a gobbet of crimson-veined phlegm, 'how deeply you must have sunk your claws into him.'

As Xenut Sul's prisoner aboard the *Demagogue,* the Salamanders captain had known and revealed little. On Macragge, with the Unburdened already having breached his mental defences, Artellus Numeon had proved much more useful.

All of this, Xenut Sul gave up to Quor Gallek before his anchor to the mortal plane was unhooked and cast off. A daemon's bargain, Xenut Sul wanted Quor Gallek to find him and pluck his incorporeal essence from the aether.

'You will have to wait, my malicious creature,' hissed Quor Gallek, rising.

So would Barthusa Narek. He knew where the fulgurite was; he had even seen vicarious testament to its power. Now all Quor Gallek had to do was obtain it.

Standing in the darkness of the tithing chamber, he lifted a still-trembling hand to the vox-panel.

'Shipmaster,' he said, 'bring us to the edge of Macragge's monitors and engage broad sensorium sweeps.'

The gravel voice of the *Monarchia*'s shipmaster came back with a question.

'*What are we seeking, Magister Quor Gallek?*'

'A large vessel,' Quor Gallek replied. 'Salamanders.'

With a unique cargo.

SEVENTEEN

Symbols

Magna Macragge Civitas, Fortress of Hera

Numeon stood in another of the Praetorium's audience halls. It did not seem so long ago that he had been received in one by no less than three primarchs. Again, he was not alone, but on this occasion Barek Zytos, Rek'or Xathen and Phaestus Var'kir accompanied him.

For now, they were the only four souls in the large, vaulted chamber.

Xathen whistled.

'Grandiose,' he muttered, taking in the spectacle of the frescoed ceiling, the ornate columns, banners and tapestries. It was a work of art, although some of that had faded during Ultramar's recent austerity as Guilliman girded his former empire. 'Every brick intended to remind us of Thirteenth Legion pre-eminence. Is all of the Fortress of Hera like this?'

'Did I make an error bringing you here for this?' asked Numeon, addressing Xathen, though his eyes never left the great doors to the hall.

The Lord of Macragge was late.

'There are lords on Nocturne with smaller manses than this antechamber,' Xathen replied.

Numeon still didn't look at him.

'Do I need to repeat myself, sergeant?'

Xathen snorted ruefully but was contrite. He raised his hand in a gesture of compliance. 'You did not make an error bringing me to this gathering, brother-captain.'

'Who are we?' Numeon asked them all.

'The sixty-six,' uttered Xathen.

‘The Pyre,’ replied Var’kir.

‘Salamanders,’ said Zytos and put a reassuring hand on Numeon’s shoulder, who turned to regard him. ‘United in this fight. Vulkan is with us. *You* are with us, Numeon. It’s time to go home.’

Numeon nodded, grateful for his brother’s support. He was about to say so when the doors to the audience hall opened.

Roboute Guilliman strode in alone. He was wearing armour, traditional Ultramarines cobalt-blue. A long crimson cloak with a furred trim taken from some native beast of Konor trailed across his broad shoulders. The gilded ultima was emblazoned proudly across his chest. He had few weapons, save for a simple heavy-gauge bolt pistol holstered on his left hip and a short-bladed gladius that would have been fit as a sword for any non-primarch. Nothing Guilliman would ever consider going into battle with but a necessary precaution given recent circumstances.

‘Captain Numeon, legionaries of the Eighteenth,’ Guilliman greeted them warmly, though his hard eyes suggested he had other matters on his mind beyond this particular meeting. ‘I am greatly relieved that Lord Vulkan has returned to us, and I swear to you all that everything shall be done to uncover how this happened.’

He towered over the Salamanders, a Macraggian battle king of old, deigning to show empathy towards his serfs.

‘My advisors inform me the primarch’s ceremonial hammer still possessed an acute teleportation charge.’

‘That is one explanation, my lord,’ said Numeon.

Guilliman nodded, not in agreement, but rather gauging the Salamander’s mood and coming to a decision.

‘Indeed it is. Either way, I am glad my brother is with us again.’

‘Yet the one complicit in his murder is not.’ Numeon’s eyes smouldered with repressed anger, as he tried to stay mindful of his surroundings. He was also reminded of the Lion’s words.

Guilliman quickly surveyed the others, and found their demeanours similar to Numeon’s. His expression darkened.

‘I regret that happened. Everything is being done to apprehend the traitor Barthusa Narek. I give you my personal–’

‘Apologies, my lord,’ Numeon interrupted, ‘but it does not matter.’

Guilliman’s eyes narrowed, and he could not hide his annoyance any more.

‘And why is that?’

‘As I said before, we are leaving. Vulkan is returned to us and your city is no longer safe. My brothers and I thank you for sheltering us, but our father must return to the earth.’

Guilliman pursed his lips. His gazed flicked to the others, who waited silently, and then back to Numeon.

‘Can I make a simple request before you make this decision?’

‘It is done, my lord. Once committed, a Salamander does not balk or turn. That is why our loyalty can never be questioned.’

‘And I would never do so, but please… Artellus, let me speak with you alone for just a moment.’

Numeon regarded the stern, patrician face of the primarch for a few seconds before nodding.

‘Very well.’

Guilliman led Numeon in silence to a true antechamber of the fortress. Within, it was well appointed with deep-pile rugs underfoot, several comfortable-looking chairs and shelves lined with parchment books. A casual glance revealed maps, histories, early scientific endeavour, philosophy, Macraggian culture and art. Nothing on tactics, weapons or warfare.

‘What is this place?’ asked Numeon, walking into the middle of the room as Guilliman retreated off to the side to stare from a glass portal that took up most of the south-facing wall.

‘A refuge,’ he said. ‘I want to savour it before it is gone forever.’

Numeon frowned. ‘Must you destroy it?’

A profound sadness entered the primarch’s voice, belying the warrior and the statesman that were his ostensible personas.

‘Yes.’

Numeon joined him at the portal. It looked out onto the Castrum and beyond towards the rest of the Civitas. The Fortress of Hera’s high vantage point provided an almost unobscured vista that genuinely stole the viewer’s breath.

‘Quite a sight, isn’t it?’

Numeon had to agree. ‘Nocturne has its wonders,’ he said, ‘but they are savage and glorious. Not like this.’

Guilliman turned to face him, looking down although his expression and his tone suggested they were equals.

‘Beauty in all things, Artellus. That is what I am trying to preserve here. I cannot bring myself to voice the unspeakable. It is hard enough to countenance

what Terra's fate may be, but I must prepare for it nonetheless.' He gestured to the view of the city. 'What do you see?'

Numeon saw splendour and industry. He saw the teeming millions of Macragge and the vaunted achievements of a powerful empire, resurgent from the blow dealt to it by a coalition of traitors.

'I see Macragge. I see Ultramar. The crown of a glorious empire.'

'Do you know what I see?'

Numeon shook his head.

'Look again. Closer,' said Guilliman.

Numeon did, and at first the view was the same. But as he lingered and interrogated with his eyes, a different vision began to manifest. Labourers repaired ornamental colonnades and replaced them with armoured bulwarks or flattened them for roads to convey tanks and carriers. The landing fields had been expanded for larger fleets of gunships. Towers were reinforced with metal and gun emplacements. Factorums billowed smoke and forges toiled endlessly in the creation of materiel. In Martial Square, a large cohort of legionaries went through practice drills. Every street and avenue, the ports and communal squares were patrolled by warriors in cobalt-blue, their bolters locked across their chests.

'I have the greatest standing army amongst the Legions, by most reckonings,' said Guilliman, his earlier melancholy replaced by conviction. 'I have allies in two other primarchs, here on my soil with the majority of their sworn warriors and I am turning my beloved Macragge into a fortress. And even then, I still do not know if it will be enough.'

'You are trying to convince us to stay,' said Numeon, but without rancour.

To his credit, Guilliman did not attempt to lie. 'I am.'

Numeon released a long, shuddering breath. 'I thought I was decided. Now I have doubt,' he confessed. Guilliman's forthright manner was in stark contrast to the Lion's subtler and interpretative rhetoric. Both were highly gifted at either, though.

'Do you know what they called me after those bastards came and tried to lay waste to our way of life in Ultramar? The Avenging Son. I like that name. It is apt, for I swear to you that vengeance is what we will seek for your father, my brother. I shall not rest until every wrong done unto us, all of us, is repaid. I have built my empire anew, with Sanguinius upon the throne.'

Numeon laughed. It was a gentle, sorrowful sound.

'How the dreams and ambitions of Ultramar differ from those of Nocturne. We are such different people.'

‘Stay, Artellus,’ Guilliman implored. ‘Stay and become a part of this. Here, on Macragge, is where you are needed.’

‘Xathen would say we were just propaganda.’

Guilliman smiled ruefully. ‘Perhaps he is wise not to trust so easily.’

‘The scars of Isstvan go deep,’ said Numeon, as if that were all the answer he needed to give.

‘You would be a symbol. Of unity, of our shared purpose. Of Imperium Secundus.’

‘I cannot,’ Numeon decided at length, as he turned from the portal. ‘I have to take my father back to Nocturne.’

‘I could forbid it,’ said Guilliman, though the threat lacked conviction.

‘You know you would have to take up your swords to prevent us.’

‘You are convinced then?’

‘Of what?’

‘That Vulkan lives. I see a corpse, not my brother. Teleportation anomaly or not, I do not believe he rose from death and ended up in the memorial gardens for you to find, Numeon.’

Numeon faced the primarch once more before he left the room.

‘And that is where we differ, my lord. I would have your blessing for the sixty-six to leave Ultramar, but I do not need it.’

‘You’ll have it, as well as escort to the edge of the system.’

‘Your sanction to depart will suffice.’

Guilliman nodded, resigned. ‘Then, so be it.’

EIGHTEEN

Purpose

Magna Macragge Civitas, Port Hera

She had many scars. Never would she be considered beautiful or majestic. War had branded her as surely and indelibly as any fire-born. Despite her aesthetic imperfections, the *Charybdis* did have something going for her. She was unyielding. Few ships of the XVIII Legion escaped the atrocity at Isstvan. Many had been reduced to wrecks within the opening salvoes of the battle, plunging through the atmosphere like hell-wreathed comets. Others were struck down during the ill-fated rush to escape destruction.

Their carcasses also now littered the black sand of Isstvan or floated ghost-like in the upper atmosphere, just beyond the world's gravitational influence.

More important than her size and the sheer power of her formidable arsenal, the *Charybdis* was a survivor. Her flanks were scored and dented. Burns marked most of her dorsal aspect. Gouges in her hull had been sealed and resealed, then patched with ablative armour. She was scorched and beaten, battered and bruised, but she endured.

Like her Legion, the *Charybdis* endured.

Numeon waited at Port Hera for the transport that would take him to the ship. On a pict-feed, he watched her enginseers direct a slew of servitors across her sore flanks as final preparation for departure was made.

'She is an ugly ship,' said a voice behind him he recognised.

'I seem to remember declining Lord Guilliman's offer of escort,' he said, smiling as he turned.

Thiel laughed but his humour was short-lived. 'Just here to see you off and tell you there are many here who would come with you. Not just I.'

Numeon looked up into the darkening sky as if he could perceive the many vessels flying in and out of Macragge, all on journeys of their own, though not nearly as far.

'Sixty-six of us, braving the storm in a single gargantuan ship. It would be poetic if it weren't so dangerous, but you are right.'

'About what?'

Numeon turned away to look back at Thiel. 'She is ugly.'

Thiel nodded.

'Whatever good fortune still exists in the galaxy, I wish all of it finds you, Artellus. I'd be lying if I said I believed as you do, but the fact you cling to hope gives me hope in return.'

They clasped forearms in the manner of warriors.

'Thank you, Aeonid. You saved my life, and reunited me with my father. It's a debt I can never repay.'

'Reach Nocturne, finish this and reward my faith in you,' said Thiel, 'and I shall consider us even.'

Numeon nodded. An announcement over the landing-pad vox said that his transport was inbound.

'I had thought Guilliman sent you here to convince me to stay,' he confessed.

'He did,' Thiel replied, 'but if my primarch can't sway you then no words of mine are going to succeed.'

'What will you do now?' asked Numeon, turning briefly as the low thrum of turbine engines resolved on the air. Three dark shapes were coming in to land. A cadre of Salamanders awaited the craft, their necks craned.

'Same as before. Lead the Red-marked and cleanse the outer worlds.'

'Inviglio…' said Numeon. 'I am sorry about his death.'

'As am I, brother. But he will not be the last, and he knew the risks. We all know.'

'Yes.'

'Yours are soon to be greater than most.'

'I fear my hardest trial will not be of the body.'

Thiel laughed, but without humour. 'I can't disagree. Whatever awaits you and yours in that storm, I wish you fortune to overcome it. You'll need luck. More than you're owed.'

Numeon smiled. 'Perhaps I'll get some of yours.'

Behind him, the transports arrived, their landing stanchions touching ferrocrete with an audible clank of metal.

Amongst the throng of drake-green legionaries there hovered a casket, its gravitic impellers raising it half a metre off the ground. Six Salamanders, including Var'kir and Zytos, stood around it in close proximity.

'Courage and honour, Artellus Numeon,' said Thiel by way of a final farewell.

'Vulkan lives,' Numeon replied and went to join the primarch's funerary guard.

Standing at the edge of the staging area, Thiel watched the Salamanders depart. As the three gunships rose slowly into the air, bound for the upper atmosphere and an embarkation with the *Charybdis,* Numeon's parting words replayed in his mind.

Vulkan lives.

'Aye, he does,' whispered Thiel to himself, 'in you.'

NINETEEN

The grey

Darkness came first, followed by a slow but growing awareness that he was not dead. With waking came profound disorientation and a desire to expel the contents of his stomach. He did so violently, retching up bile into the corner of the chamber he currently occupied.

Then he leant back, gasping for breath, alarmed by the sudden closeness of metal against him, and tried to remember.

Even his own name eluded him, an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia strangling any attempt at cogent recall. Seized with sudden panic, he thrashed about the confines of the tiny cell. It was low and he hit his head several times as he tested the limits of his small, metal world. Pounding the walls with his fists proved equally futile.

He had no memory. Of anything.

Sagging down, he pushed his feet out in front of him. Something impeded them. He nudged it again, and found it heavy but yielding.

It was a body. He was not alone. Instinct made him reach for a weapon that was not there. Instead, he balled his fists.

'Who are you?'

Another pang of anxiety gripped him as he didn't recognise the rasping voice issuing from his own lips. Hands trembling, he ran his fingers across his face but didn't recognise the features either.

'Who are you?' he asked again, kicking the body hard to get a reaction.

There was nothing. No answer. No movement.

'Dead?' He only realised he had said the word out loud when it echoed back at

him.

Struggling, he got onto his hands and knees and crawled the short distance to the body. By now, his eyes were adjusting to the darkness and he could discern a vague shape to the corpse he shared this cell with. It was armoured; he could tell by the form and the hardness of the edges. He tapped it experimentally with his finger and was rewarded with a hard thud of unyielding metal.

Ceramite. Adamantium.

The words sprang into his mind unbidden, but he instantly knew them to be true and accurate in describing the warrior's armour.

Legionary battleplate.

Yes, he remembered that too, just as he became aware that he was also wearing armour.

As if a gossamer thin veil had been spun to obscure a light and now that light was burning through the veil in tiny shafts of illumination, he began to piece together his fractured psyche.

'Radiance.'

A flare of magnesium-bright light exploded into being on his command. Issuing from a suit lamp built into his armour, it revealed his confinement to be some form of cargo crate. There was a hatch on the far side. It also described the body he shared it with in much more detail.

Transhuman. Male.

'Legionary…' he said aloud, getting used to his own voice. 'Or is it?'

The dead warrior was armoured in grey. He wore a helm too. No markings. No rank insignia. Only one identifying sigil, so slight that he almost missed it – a stylised eye, within an iota.

It had been engraved into the grey armour. Small and unobtrusive. He had no knowledge of this.

'Who are you?'

Understandably, the dead warrior did not answer.

'Did I do this?'

There was no blood on his gauntleted hands.

'Are we allies? Prisoners?'

Searching the body, he found a sidearm.

Bolt pistol, his slowly reassembling mind told him.

There was a combat knife sheathed with a weapons belt, so he took those too.

'Something went wrong…'

There was blood. A tiny pinprick of it against the back of the dead warrior's

neck. He could smell it, that wet metal stench that was disturbingly familiar. A needle-thin blade had rolled into the edge of the crate, discarded, almost impossible to find.

The memory of a struggle returned. Short-lived. A command word uttered with a dying breath.

Sleep.

Even the vague memory of it made him groggy.

Another command word began to form. This one he spoke aloud as he holstered the pistol and pointed it at the wall of the crate.

'Egress.'

With a sharp *clunk-thud* of a retracting bolt, the hatch door in the crate opened. He levered it wider with his boot, keeping the pistol trained on whatever was waiting outside.

A cluttered hold lay beyond. Dark, the air humming with the hold's close proximity to the engines.

A small ship. Freighter.

Exiting the crate, he looked around and found an exit, a short stairway leading to a gantry that ended in an elliptical door portal.

Freedom.

He was about to move out when he paused and looked down. His armour was sacrificial red, crimson like blood. Cuneiform was etched in the plates.

Colchisian.

'I am Barthusa Narek,' he said, and a deep smile crept across his pugnacious features as memory came full circle. There were lacunas still. After Titus Prayto's most recent interrogation, he remembered nothing else. Not this ship. Not how he escaped from the Eastern Keep. Certainly not the dead legionary who he had shared a berth with.

Not fully understanding why, Narek went back to the crate and exchanged armour with the corpse. It fitted him, strangely well.

'Seal,' he said and the crate locked itself with his discarded armour and the dead body still inside. Confident no one aboard this vessel would be able to open it, at least not easily and without strong cutting tools, he made for the exit.

Much was missing, great gaps torn from his memory. He didn't know why, but deep down, rooted in his subconscious Narek did know he had been given a mission. He just didn't know its purpose.

Not yet.

PART TWO
ODYSSEY

TWENTY

Across the shadows

Ultramar fringes

The Shadow Crusade had left a blight across Ultramar. The Five Hundred Worlds would never be the same again. At the farthest reaches, beyond the aegis of Macragge and the empire's primus worlds, the desolation was at its worst.

Out here in the lawless depths of space, planets still burned.

At first scavengers and less scrupulous rogue traders had flocked to the wake of the war. Every floating wreck had the potential in it for profit. But not every vessel was empty. Some harboured the legionaries left behind once Lorgar had finished his symphony.

Bandits of a kind were drawn to the aftermath, renegades against the Throne who had banded together for survival. Petty warlords arose, the remnants and cast-offs of the larger and more powerful Legions. Most had never even heard of the Shadow Crusade, but flocked like carrion crows to the detritus of it anyway.

Some of these lingering traitors still possessed ships, the very vessels the Red-marked were striving so hard to destroy. The scavenging ceased and an eerie quietude descended upon Ultramar's periphery, pregnant with the potential for violence.

Destruction heaped atop destruction with nothing to explain its cause.

Husks of dead ships drifted anchorless and unmourned through the void, their bellies ripped out. Immense capital ships lay torn in half, rotting in silence and darkness. Debris fields that encompassed entire systems had created a vast and near-impenetrable labyrinth for the *Charybdis* to navigate. It was slow going.

'Keep us steady, plasma drives at three-quarters strength,' Adyssian calmly ordered the helm. 'Come about, twenty degrees starboard.'

They breached the first major debris boundary, a heavy veil of drifting scrap metal amongst a dense asteroid belt.

'Aye, sir,' Lyssa Esenzi replied.

Kolo Adyssian had the dark pallor of a Hesiod noble, born into the Navy and an honourable charge as shipmaster. No more than thirty-three years Terran standard, he was young and had survived his predecessor, Tibult Oghuru, who had died during the flight from Isstvan V. A scar ran from Adyssian's left cheek almost to his nose, by way of reminder.

Losing the old man had cut deeply. Tibult had been like a father to him, but it was far from the worst tragedy Adyssian had ever endured. It had hurt, but it had not left a void in his soul. Another loss, one he tried not to think about, had caused that.

Under his right eye, he bore the Nocturnean sigil for courage, the sign of the anvil. His eyes were bright, not red like the legionaries of his death world, but pale green like his mother's. With short dark hair, barring a salting of white in his close-cropped beard, he was exceptionally composed and a natural warship captain.

Esenzi had survived her previous incumbent also, but she had killed the last helmsman when he had lost his mind prior to the evacuation order and attempted to leave his post for the saviour pods. She never spoke of it, nor harboured any guilt over the act. It had left her profoundly stern, a burden of duty rather than conscience, ever wary of a similar fate. She was beautiful, a fact Adyssian recognised, with lightly tanned skin and long crimson hair she wore in a vibrant mohawk, typical of Aethonion.

Through the sensorium array, Adyssian was maintaining a close watch on a large graveyard of ships currently fifty-six kilometres away and closing.

Their primary heading towards Nocturne had taken them beyond Macragge's boundaries. The *Charybdis* was entering less well charted waters. It made Adyssian wary.

'How large is that battlefield, Esenzi?'

'Vast.' She showed him a data-slate.

Adyssian frowned. He wanted to fly around the graveyard, but a detour of the magnitude required to do that would bring them egregiously off course. According to navigational charts, a Mandeville point existed just beyond the cluster of dead ships. From there they could drop into warp space and hope that the Ruinstorm didn't tear the ship apart.

'Circe,' Adyssian opened a vox-link to their Navigator. 'I need you prepared as

soon as we breach the other side of the debris field. Are you ready?'

Circe's voice came back with the strain of concentration.

'*I am, shipmaster. All is well. Are you planning an early translation into the warp?*'

It was as if she could read his mind. If they did get into trouble picking their way through the graveyard, if ambushers were lurking and they couldn't fight their way out, it might be the only option.

'Let's hope not,' he answered honestly, then cut the feed. 'Helm,' he said, 'take us in. Reduce input to the plasma drives, void shields at twenty per cent.'

Such a low power output to the *Charybdis'*s shields would not unduly strain the ship's reserves, but would act as a useful buffer against any smaller debris they would inevitably come into contact with.

Lyssa Esenzi complied and Adyssian watched with satisfaction as the hololith image changed to reflect their defensive status.

He eased back into his throne but looked far from relaxed.

'What do we have on sensors?'

'Precious little, I'm afraid,' said Esenzi, turning to face the shipmaster. 'Radiation is saturating this entire region. We've lost our eyes and ears for the moment.'

'Then we shall have to rely on your touch then, helm.' He smiled. It was meant to be reassuring. Esenzi nodded mutely, returning to her instruments.

Adyssian gave a small shrug. It would take more than a warm smile to thaw the protective ice around her.

'Nice and slow, Esenzi.'

'Aye, sir.'

In close, details of the ship graveyard at first lost on account of how far away it was began to materialise.

Broken sections of sundered ships drifted together with hunks of rock and swathes of glittering particulate. Eventually this minor flotsam gave way to entire vessels, listing serenely, their smashed-open portals staring darkly like the dead eyes of corpses.

In many ways, they were.

Others had been cored out completely, their deaths the result of catastrophic chain reactions, evidenced by what was left of the vessels. Through narrow apertures in the ragged hulls, pockets of crewmen could still be seen drifting. Attached to guide-ropes, they had failed to disengage their harnesses before the end and so would forever dangle like forgotten puppets on loose strings.

A vast behemoth of a ship loomed on the starboard side, so large that even several kilometres away it obscured the view farther into the debris field. Huge rents had been torn in its flanks and its internal superstructure hung open like an abused skeleton.

As large as the *Charybdis* was, it could fly through the gutted remains of this gargantuan hulk like a minnow through the carcass of a gnorl-whale, if carefully navigated.

Adyssian ordered Esenzi to take them through. Based on the last sensorium returns, she had already plotted a viable course that fell within acceptable risk parameters. They went in dark, their internal lumens kept low and their power signature to a minimum.

Too huge to go around, the massive ship effectively impeded their path. They had to forge through it but, given what could be lurking in the shadows, it was prudent to be cautious.

Within its ruptured innards, the hulk was no less impressive. Huge internal amphitheatres opened up beyond the ship's ruined outer skin. Overhead, split gantries and walkways jutted from the interior like bones.

Whatever had befallen this behemoth, little more than a shell remained.

Through one hall, entire battle companies of legionaries were locked in combat, flash-frozen during a final engagement. Bodies clad in cobalt-blue and crimson, each rimed in hoarfrost, began to drift in the wake of the *Charybdis'*s passage. Some impacted against the shields, shattering into fragments. Others maintained their eternal struggle, hands wrapped around throats, blades impaled in icy bodies, bolters extended for a killing salvo.

Adyssian knew all Space Marines were genetically engineered to resist the degrading effects of the void, but even legionaries could not do so indefinitely. Something terrible must have transpired here, a conflict so bitter it had driven those in it to keep fighting until they froze solid.

There was a grim serenity to it all.

'Such is the fate of all warriors,' said a deep voice from behind the shipmaster's throne that made every man of the crew jerk suddenly. 'Or so we would wish it.'

Recovering his composure, Adyssian turned to face a legionary in drake-scale green.

'Sergeant Zytos,' he said, bowing slightly even though this was his bridge, 'I did not hear you enter.'

Zytos's fiery gaze had alighted on the captured feed relayed on the pict screens in front of the helm.

‘Apologies, shipmaster. I noticed the *Charybdis* was on all silent, so I considered it best to adopt a similar approach.’

‘Prudent.’

‘I thought so.’ Zytos gestured to the visual feed. ‘What am I looking at, shipmaster?’

Suddenly alert, Adyssian rapidly brought up whatever data the *Charybdis* had in its internal cogitators.

‘Records indicate it’s a Seventeenth Legion vessel that exceeds Gloriana-class displacement. Beyond that, there’s nothing further known about it.’

‘She’s a beast,’ muttered Zytos.

‘Indeed, sire.’

‘What do you think happened to her?’

‘Judging by the intense radiation levels, I’d say a warp engine detonation.’

Zytos looked on grimly at the bodies that kept showing up on the visuals. Amongst the dead of the XIII and XVII, he saw iron and raven-black, even drake-green. Not all of the legionaries who had reached Ultramar got as far as Macragge.

Some miracles had no heroic finale, they merely ended in death.

Dreadnoughts and the shells of Legiones Astartes gunships thickened the grisly throng with bulk and mass.

‘What else is out here, beyond the dead?’ Zytos wondered out loud.

Adyssian had no answer. None amongst the crew did, so silence answered for them.

After several minutes during which those on the bridge were allowed to marvel at the sheer majesty of the ship they were literally travelling through, the *Charybdis* emerged from the gargantuan wreck. Far off in the distance a star died and the resultant solar flare cast the void around them in a dull, amber glow.

It also revealed a ship at low anchor, hiding in the umbral side of a small moon.

‘What, by Throne, is that?’ asked Adyssian just as the sensorium feed cleared and a beacon alert sounded.

Esenzi triangulated the signal. ‘It’s an Imperial distress code. Signal originates from an installation three hundred and eighty-one kilometres away and closing.’

‘Magnify.’

The visual feed zoomed in dramatically, displaying a small planetoid-based station comprised of geodesic domes and several large drilling rigs. Isolated as it was, it must have avoided the void war but with the cessation of the conflict had now come under scrutiny.

‘Its designation is “Rampart”. Civilian. Looks like a refuelling depot.’

‘And the ship attempting to mask its presence behind that moon?’ asked Adyssian, forgetting the legionary on his bridge whilst he went about his duty.

‘Light cruiser, Gladius-class. Recently disgorged landers.’

‘Headed to Rampart.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Adyssian quickly checked the cruiser’s designation.

Necrotor. The XIV Legion, then.

‘Death Guard,’ said Zytos, before Adyssian could read it off the hololith. ‘How many?’

Adyssian frowned. ‘Sergeant?’

Zytos’s face was set like granite as he turned to the shipmaster.

‘Landers. How many of them?’

Esenzi quickly provided the answer.

‘Three, my lord.’

‘I’m not your lord. Don’t call me that again. Refer to my rank.’

Esenzi flushed, chastened. She fought not to tremble before the legionary’s annoyance.

‘Duly noted, Sergeant Zytos.’

Zytos didn’t acknowledge her. He was already leaving the bridge.

‘Have a Thunderhawk ready in the launch bays,’ he said as he departed. ‘My brothers and I will be there presently. Xathen…’ he began, now using his suit’s internal vox.

‘Sergeant.’ Adyssian’s call made Zytos stop and turn just before the doors to the bridge.

‘You have something further to add, shipmaster?’ He had already unclasped his helmet and had it ready in his left hand.

‘Our mission, the nature of these ruins beyond the heart of Ultramar. There could be anything out here, and the longer we delay…’ Confronted by the sergeant’s hellish glare, Adyssian trailed off. ‘All I mean to ask is, is this wise?’

‘No, it isn’t, but I won’t ignore my duty for the sake of prudence.’

Zytos turned and was gone.

‘Three landers,’ Xathen considered. ‘Even if we took the entire cadre, we’d still probably be outnumbered.’

‘That’s why we won’t, Xathen. We reconnoitre and vox for reinforcements if needed.’

‘Those landers are gunships. Could be thirty suits of plate in each one.’

‘We can’t ignore it.’

‘And we can’t risk more legionaries.’

Zytos glanced at Xathen. ‘You see my problem, then.’

The veteran nodded.

He walked in lockstep with Zytos, priming and preparing a small arsenal.

After Xathen had racked the slide of his Phobos-pattern bolter to ensure the breech was clear, he then checked the load-out of his two sidearms, a hand flamer and a bolt pistol with sickle magazine. He carried three blades, two combat knives – one serrated, one single-edged – and a shortened *kaskara,* which he strapped horizontally across his back.

A flame gauntlet, the signature weapon of a Pyroclast, encased his right hand.

‘Are you sure you’re well enough equipped, brother?’ Zytos asked, but his mild sarcasm was lost on the veteran.

‘I had considered adding a volkite,’ Xathen replied, adjusting his weapons belt on the move, ‘and I can modify the Phobos-pattern so it’ll accommodate an underslung launcher. Should I go back?’

Zytos shook his head, relieved that his smile was hidden behind the snarl of his helmet’s faceplate.

Like all of the sixty-six, his armour had a draconic aspect. Even their greaves and breastplates were scalloped at the edges like scales. Drake mantles were pinned to gnarled-looking shoulder guards. Most of these cloaks were burned and torn up a little, much like their wearers.

It was a small force that descended on Rampart, but a battle-hardened one.

They lacked a single element.

‘Where’s Numeon? I can’t reach him on the vox,’ asked Zytos. They were nearer the vertical-conveyor that would take them down as far as the landing bay, and he had expected word from the Pyre’s leader before now.

‘Where do you think?’

‘I see.’ Zytos had seen precious little of Numeon since their departure from Macragge. The captain preferred to spend his waking hours with the dead, rather than the living, it seemed.

‘Is he alone?’ Zytos asked.

‘Var’kir’s with him.’

‘Have our Chaplain tell the captain his presence is needed.’

‘We could let him be,’ suggested Xathen. ‘Don’t misunderstand, I would rather he be with us, but you and I can lead this sortie to Rampart.’

‘I know, brother, but dragging Numeon from that tomb is not for our benefit. It’s for his.’

‘How long have you been here?’ asked Numeon. His head was bowed and he crouched down on one knee. His outstretched hand touched the lid of the casket.

‘Not as long as you.’

Var’kir stepped from the shadows into the small storage chamber. It had been stripped of supplies and equipment. Only Vulkan’s casket was harboured in it now, secured in the deeps of the ship where it could remain largely undisturbed.

No memorial flame cast illumination onto the Chaplain’s ageing countenance as he came into the light, but rather a phosphor-lume hanging overhead and swaying in the gentle susurrations emitted by the atmospheric recyclers.

‘Keeps it cold,’ said Numeon, gesturing to the boxed turbines as he stood up to meet the Chaplain’s interrogating gaze. ‘Are you trying to interpret me as you might a flame, Var’kir?’

‘No need to. Everything you are feeling is right in front of me, Artellus.’

‘Is that so?’ He glanced down to look upon his father. Vulkan slumbered still, hands clenched around the warhammer *Dawnbringer,* and the fulgurite jutting from his chest like a poison lance.

‘You fear he will rise again.’

Numeon frowned, nonplussed. ‘Why would I fear that?’

‘You fear you will not be here to witness it.’

‘Do I need to bear witness? Is that what your insight tells you, Var’kir?’

Var’kir bowed his head at the sudden anger in Numeon’s tone. ‘I meant no offence, merely to offer an observation.’

‘I am told our father is dead, that he was slain by an assassin’s dagger, a blade that sits in him still.’

‘And you think by removing it, Vulkan will regenerate?’

‘He survived atmospheric re-entry onto Macragge,’ said Numeon. ‘Yes, I think he will live if we can take out the fulgurite. He could even excise it himself.’

‘Have you tried to remove it?’

Numeon nodded, calmer. ‘I have.’

‘Since we came aboard the *Charybdis*?’

Another nod.

Var’kir’s brow furrowed as he noticed the blood dripping down from Numeon’s hands. He had laid his gauntlets and helm to one side. The vox-feed in the latter had been disengaged.

‘How many times?’

‘Every day.’ Now he shook his head, despairing. ‘But it never yields.’

‘It won’t. Ever. Not to strength, brother.’

‘Then what about will or belief?’

‘You think if you believe strongly enough, Vulkan will come back to us?’

‘And if I am alone in that, then my will shall have to be enough.’

For a moment, Var’kir was lost for words.

‘I am with you, Artellus. We all are. Vulkan shall return to Nocturne but it is to be laid to rest, not revivified.’

‘Don’t you believe in immortality, Var’kir? In rebirth? Isn’t that what the Circle of Fire preaches?’

‘The dead do not come back, Artellus. I am not saying this to you as your Chaplain, but as your brother and friend. Do not cling to this poisonous obsession, it will destroy you.’

Numeon scowled as his ambivalent feelings fought for supremacy in his expression. He opened his hands to the Chaplain. The wounds on his palms and fingers were shallow but many. The gesture was symbolic.

‘Help me, Var’kir. Please.’

‘Tell me, what can I do, brother?’

Intense emotion flashed through Numeon’s eyes. It was frightening to see.

‘Believe.’

The vox crackle in Var’kir’s helm came as welcome relief to the Chaplain. He listened. Numeon watched.

Their eyes met as the message ended, cold glass lenses to crimson sclera.

Numeon spoke first. ‘What is it, brother?’

‘Our duty, Artellus.’

A solitary gunship speared from the *Charybdis*’s starboard launch bays, its engines glowing dully and without flame as they powered the warriors on board to Rampart. Its name was *Draconis*.

Adyssian had withdrawn the *Charybdis* back into the radiation field to mask her presence from the *Necrotor*. No outward signs from the Death Guard ship suggested they had been detected.

At full burn, it was a short flight to the installation. Twelve legionaries sat in the gunship’s hold, arming themselves and preparing for whatever awaited them. The light was low, indicating imminent combat insertion. An odd serenity fell across the warriors within, for the void offered up no turbulence.

Eighteen minutes had elapsed since they had received the distress beacon's signal. Xathen maintained watch on the chrono inside his visor.

'If they are Death Guard, it won't matter what defences Rampart has. It won't take them more than half an hour to breach, kill everyone on that station and retrieve whatever it is they came for.'

'Then hope we arrive to stop them before that happens,' said Zytos. He had a bolter mag-clamped to his armour's power generator but favoured a deactivated thunder hammer sat across his lap. 'Ushamann?' he asked the Epistolary, who sat apart from the others on the opposite side of the hold to Zytos.

The Librarian had closed his eyes to focus on the arcane. It had been a significant time since Ushamann had used the art. In Imperium Secundus, Guilliman had reinstated the Librarius with Titus Prayto at its head. Psychic abilities were weapons; only the user mattered, not the weapon itself. Such thinking had come about through necessity rather than invention. In spite of all that, Ushamann had held on. He had been a student of Ra'stan before the massacre, and had clung to the tenets of his master long after his death. Abstention, denial of power was the Emperor's will. Only recently had Ushamann begun to do otherwise. Pragmatism superseded duty, for it in itself served duty.

'*There is fear… many lives…*' he murmured to his brothers in a strange, resonant undertone, as if he were speaking from beneath the ocean.

Xathen nudged Zytos. 'I thought this place was a refuelling depot?'

'*Our cousins react with aggression,*' Ushamann continued. Amongst his many talents, he was an excellent telepath and tried to home in on the emotional backwash emanating from Rampart through the warp to his carefully trained mind. '*Reckless hate… I feel…*' Ushamann shuddered in his restraints, hands clenching and unclenching with sudden effort. His face was a tapestry of pain as he fought to grasp a tendril of emotion. '*Something toxic…*'

Psychic abilities were like springs; they could rust through lack of use.

'*Save us!*' he cried out in a voice not his own. '*Throne of Earth, please! Help us, Angel of the Emperor, help–*'

The voice cut out abruptly but Ushamann kept shaking, convulsing against his harness. His fingers splayed out like knives and something crackled brightly from their tips in the dingy hold.

'*It has them,*' he murmured. '*A taint, it claws at my skull. Unearths Kabar! I cannot–*'

There was the hard crack of a gauntleted blow to the head, and Ushamann fell

forwards, held limply in his seat like a broken doll. Igen Gargo stood over him, mag-locked to the deck. The white-haired black-smiter rotated his shoulder, then returned to his seat in the hold.

'Was that necessary?' asked Xathen, gesturing to the unconscious Librarian. 'He's out cold. We might need him.'

'He could have destroyed this entire ship. Besides, you're missing the point, Rek'or,' Gargo replied. 'He said "Angel of the Emperor" whilst channelling a soul from Rampart.'

'He said a lot of things,' replied Xathen. 'That part about taint for instance. And who is Kabar?'

'The soul he channelled? It doesn't matter. It means we could have an ally down there,' said Gargo. He jerked his arm, stretching it out and back three times.

Xathen leaned over. 'Still having trouble, black-smiter?'

Gargo looked about to give Xathen some trouble of his own when he was interrupted.

'Ushamann's borrowed words mean nothing,' said Numeon, leaning forwards as far as his restraint would allow. 'Assume nothing, brothers. Our enemies are below and will try to deceive us if they can.'

Gargo lowered his gaze, but Xathen appeared enthused and smiled belligerently behind his helm. Everyone in the hold could hear it in his voice.

'I could not agree more, captain. Give no quarter, for none shall be given in return.'

Zytos opened a private feed to Xathen.

'*A little belligerent, brother,*' he murmured in a subvocalised tone augmented by his helm then translated and magnified for Rek'or Xathen. '*If I didn't know better, I'd say you were relishing the fight more than your duty to these civilians.*'

Xathen was typically dismissive. '*If they're dead, which is likely. It is a mission of vengeance, not salvation, we undertake.*'

'*Which would you prefer?*'

Xathen had the strength of character not to lie. '*Either.*'

'*What happened to your concern over numerical superiority?*'

'*I never cared about that, Zytos. I just want to kill our betrayers.*'

Some wounds went too deep to salve, Zytos realised. Not coincidentally, his eye was drawn to Numeon at the thought.

He had left open the feed and as Xathen followed Zytos's gaze, he asked, '*Is he*

ready for this?'

'*Gargo informs me his physical rehabilitation was excessive.*' Zytos looked askance at Xathen as he realised something. '*And didn't you spend countless sessions in the battle cages with him?*'

'*Oh, he fights like a mean bastard still, but I'm not talking about his physical wounds.*'

Even amongst brothers, Numeon appeared withdrawn and distant. His mind seemed elsewhere.

'*Either he is, or he falls. Here. On Rampart,*' Zytos stated and cut the feed, but it could not mask his doubt.

An Angel of the Emperor had come to Rampart, and he alone fought the Death Guard.

Whoever he was, he would not be alone for long.

TWENTY-ONE

Tainted

Ultramar, Rampart refuelling depot and minor substation

Rampart possessed a thin atmosphere and tolerable gravity. Though not lethal to humans, it still necessitated the use of protective suits and rebreathers. The air was foul with grit, displaced from uninhabitable sulphur dunes north of the station itself, and had higher than comfortably breathable levels of methane and ammonia. A distant star conglomeration provided some natural light but it was weak and left the planetoid bitterly cold. A grey and cloudless sky reigned overhead, a metaphor for the bleak existence of Rampart's resident labourers.

After the Salamanders had landed, Far'kor Zonn penetrated and nullified Rampart's sensoria remotely and with ease. Outside detection range, the Techmarine engineered and emitted a signal pulse that blinded every device capable of monitoring the gunship's approach.

Unlike the others, who disembarked at speed as the rear ramp hit the ground, Zonn stayed behind to run communications and infiltrate the station's security systems. As pilot, he also had to keep their engines running in case an emergency egress was required.

His mechanised voice sounded across Zytos's vox.

'*Docking zone ahead.*'

Zonn marked its location with an icon on the retinal feed.

'Numeon?' Zytos asked, his request for orders implied as he slowed.

The response across the vox was curt. '*Take point, sergeant. These are your men.*'

Zytos gritted his teeth, but masked his anger. *Lead us,* he thought, but said, 'As you wish, captain.'

Using battle-sign, Zytos relayed orders for the squad to split into two. Such tactics were abnormal for legionaries used to mass military actions, but almost every one of the Salamanders present had become well practised at this guerrilla-style warfare.

Adapt or die. This credo had never seemed more pertinent than it did during the Warmaster's rebellion.

The docking zone was little more than a large expanse of dirt used exclusively as a landing pad. Several ships were already moored, mostly tankers, but there was a small frigate too. A tunnel, partially subterranean, led from the docking zone. An empty, domed watchtower overlooked it. It had a search lamp, shot out, but no weapons.

A pair of grubby-looking white gunships with green-trimmed wingspans and upper fuselages sat nearby.

'Two landers sighted,' said Zytos. 'Death Guard. Confirm.'

Leading second squad, Xathen replied, '*I see them, brother. That tunnel is our way in. Likely guarded.*'

'Not if they aren't expecting us,' said Zytos, blink-clicking a regroup point and marking it up on the visual feed. 'Recon every ship, Xathen,' he added, leading off first squad. 'No surprises.'

Reconnoitring the vessels in dock revealed nothing, except the dead.

Most had been ripped apart by explosive ammunition. Bolter shells. One female, possibly a medicae adept judging by the emblem on her atmosphere suit, had simply died without apparent sign of injury. A dark mould had built up over her rebreather. Others showed similar signs of contagion.

By the time both squads reached the gunships, they had found over sixty dead civilians.

'Destroyers?' suggested Dakar, as the squads regrouped.

Gargo was kneeling by one of the bodies to inspect it. He had some apothecarion knowledge, the only one who did amongst the Pyre.

'Possibly. A dirty bomb, perhaps? Looks invasive.'

Vulkan had never once condoned the use of such weapons. Radiation grenades, phosphex, virus bombs… the Salamanders primarch had called them terror weapons with no place in his Legion. It was one of few matters on which he and Ferrus Manus did not agree.

For the Gorgon, the end justified the means. Any enemy of the Imperium deserved no quarter. Vulkan saw them a inhumane, even when Ferrus Manus had reminded him burning foes to death was equally unpleasant. As Vulkan saw it,

there was a vast difference and so the matter was laid to rest unresolved. Now it would remain so forever, regardless of whether the body on board the *Charybdis* had life in it still.

'Nothing on biometrics,' said Xathen, as he checked the integrity of his armour. 'Not even radiation.'

Gargo looked up at the veteran. 'Could be the taint Ushamann mentioned?'

'Either way, they're dead,' said Zytos. 'I hope we're not too late for the rest.'

Xathen gestured to the gunships. 'I hope there are Death Guard still aboard,' he growled, out for blood.

How easily an ostensibly humanitarian mindset could turn vengeful.

Without the influence of Numeon, who seemed satisfied to follow his sergeant's lead, Zytos decided to give Xathen what he wanted.

'Cleanse the ships. Both of them. Quickly.'

A deep guttural noise rumbled up from Xathen's throat, reminiscent of a true drake. His yearning to kill the Death Guard, who had rained down destruction upon the Salamanders at Isstvan V, was almost palpable.

'I'll burn them to ash.'

'And the third vessel?' said Numeon, making the two sergeants turn.

Zytos answered firmly. 'Civilians first. Zonn can search for the third vessel.' He maintained eye contact with his captain as if to challenge any attempt to countermand his order. Numeon offered none.

'Then make haste. Vulkan waits.'

He will be waiting a good long while, thought Zytos, bitterly, but was reminded of what he had heard when the primarch was first placed within his casket. A single heartbeat. The sight of Vulkan's sigil attached to Numeon's belt, his utter belief and determination, made it harder to discount that sign as either imagination or wishful thinking. Now was not the time. Other matters took precedence. Lives in the balance. Their solemn duty.

Protect the weak. Defend those who cannot defend themselves.

These words warred with others in Numeon's mind. Zytos could see it in his eyes just before they moved out.

Honour thy father.

Second squad moved off to silence the transports. First squad headed for the tunnel.

Zonn deactivated the gate, rerouting power so Gargo could prise it open manually. He did so quickly and covertly, overwhelming the mechanism through

sheer strength and widening the aperture just enough so the Salamanders could slip through.

After the tunnel, they found a prefabricated complex beneath the first geodesic dome. It was large. Individually segregated habitation bunks implied a sizeable workforce. Rough picts of family members, elsewhere in Ultramar, offered a microcosmic lens into the labourers' lives but there was little room for further affectations. Every bunk was regimented. Even tools and equipment were under lock and key in an approximation of an armoury.

Underfoot, the floor was dirt and earth. Deck plating ran to some areas but was used sparsely. Narrow gantries overhead provided access to upper bunks and the domiciles of overseers. No man or woman was present. Alive or dead.

Beyond habitation, there was a medical bay and several machine workshops designated for tool repair. A vehicle bay lay empty, but one of the armoured transporters was up on blocks over a maintenance pit. Its dozer blade had been removed and sat undisturbed on the open maintenance floor. There were no weapons, and still no inhabitants.

Xathen's voice crackled over the vox-feed. Some minor distortion suggested the domes interfered with vox signals but Zytos heard him well enough.

'*Found our traitorous cousins,*' he said. '*Everyone on the gunships is dead. All the crew, with single gunshots to the head, through the canopy.*'

'How many?' asked Zytos. He kept the squad moving, picking up the pace.

'*Six legionaries. Three per vessel.*'

'Any sign of their killer?'

'*Negative. Shells were mass-reactive. Left a lot of mess.*' Xathen paused before asking, '*Did I miss the war, Zytos?*' He sounded disappointed.

'Not yet. Bring your squad up to the tunnel and follow us in. This place is huge.'

As the vox-feed ended, Zytos could already hear Xathen shouting at his charges to move quickly. His eagerness for combat stemmed from an inability to influence the war in a meaningful way, something every Salamander felt to a lesser or greater degree.

Of the three Legions massacred at Isstvan V, the Iron Hands still had the bulk of their fighting strength. Scattered, yes, but numerically they were still legion and their voice shouted loudest in the guerrilla efforts Zytos had come to understand were taking place in the galaxy at large. Even the Raven Guard, though much diminished, still had Corax and could flock to his raised banner. Shadow war suited them, anyway.

No, it was the Salamanders who were wounded worst. Scattered, dramatically reduced militarily, and their primarch – at least for now – gone. Leadership was needed. Zytos had hoped Artellus Numeon would take up the mantle of Cassian Vaughn, the old Legion Master. Another hope, a fire long-thought doused but rekindling, grew in Zytos now. His natural pragmatism told him to refute it, and encourage Numeon to take up his rightful position, but that selfsame warrior's belief was pushing him towards yearning for the impossible.

Resurrection.

Vulkan lives.

'We need to narrow the search,' said Gargo, echoing Zytos's recent thoughts. He was standing at a broad arch that led further into the dome. Ordinarily, an overseer would have manned it. Currently, that post was empty.

The others were close by, maintaining defensive overwatch as they advanced through the dingy habitation chamber.

'Raise Zonn,' said Numeon, but allowing Zytos the lead. He had given the sergeant command and would honour that decision.

Zytos requested a schematic of the complex from the Techmarine who accessed the data and inloaded it to the squad's retinal feeds in a matter of seconds. It didn't help, only confirming the sheer size of the complex.

Three main domes annexed six smaller subsidiaries. Rapidly blink-clicking through the data-feed, Zytos discounted the smaller ones. He was looking for a main hub, something the Death Guard would be drawn to and the Imperial defenders, if any were left, would flock to defend and seek shelter within.

One presented itself a few seconds later.

'North-east quadrant. Zone zero-eight-seven-slash-zero-zero-nine-three,' he read straight off the schematic, magnifying the heads-up blueprint overlaying his visual display.

'Core power generators,' said Dakar, seeing the grid reference as Zytos marked it with a loc-signal.

'That's where they'll be. Near the light, the heat.' Zytos didn't wait for Numeon's approval. He knew he was right. 'Move fast. There are lives at stake.'

The squad followed him.

Through an expansive storage yard, across the mine-face where tools lay discarded and in mid-use, then through an ancillary chamber. It appeared to be a refectory, and it was there that they made contact with some of Rampart's labourers.

All eighty-seven of them were dead, gutted or poisoned despite their

rebreathers.

No one slowed to regard the dead. A quick visual bio-scan revealed their fate and a cursory glance at the manner of their deaths showed who had been responsible.

'*As with these poor souls, as on the battlefield,*' Gargo murmured across the vox. He referred to the XIV Legion.

Painstaking, exacting, the Death Guard had taken their time with this massacre. Their methods were slow, inexorable.

'I see the work of Destroyers here,' said Vorko, resisting the urge to set the charnel pit ablaze with his flamer as the Salamanders hurried on.

'Be ready for anything,' Numeon uttered across the squad vox, 'Those of Barbarus do not go down easily.' His words recalled a memory shared by all Salamanders, of a black killing field and the ranks of implacable Death Guard holding them in that bloody desert basin.

A stark reminder of those dread ranks came to life around the next corner. A narrow tunnel, no more than a conduit to a larger chamber beyond.

Six legionaries in dirty white armour trimmed in turbid green were at work with black *kukra* blades. A taint emanated off these warriors, an unwholesome stench that reminded Zytos of putrefaction. Their ugly, slatted Mark II war-helms turned as one at the abrupt and unexpected interruption.

One, a master sergeant judging by his visible rank insignia, shouted out a warning or a challenge in his native Barbaran.

The Salamanders had already drawn bolters and filled the narrow defile with a hail of shells.

His own weapon bucking hard in his firm grip, Zytos saw three XIV legionaries struck before Vorko stepped in and doused the entire corridor in burning promethium.

The reek of cooking flesh, but old spoiled meat, exuded from the Death Guard bodies now ablaze.

Return fire came in sporadic bursts, but it was wild and unfocused as the six legionaries took cover behind natural alcoves in the rock.

Zytos and his squad stood their ground, picking their targets as Vorko released another fiery gout into the corridor. Above the roar of flames, the master sergeant bellowed more orders. Something stepped into the fire and the heat haze from the opposite end of the corridor.

Zytos did not hesitate. 'Down and disperse!'

An actinic beam of heat-bleeding crimson speared through obfuscating black

smoke. It took Vorko low in the hip. Eagerly burning his foes, the legionary had been slow to retreat but now howled in agony as his left greave was scorched black and the mesh layer beneath melted to his skin. His armour saved the leg, which would have been shorn off otherwise.

Hauling on his shoulder guards, Zytos and Numeon dragged the still screaming Vorko out of harm's way. Zytos recognised the effects of a volkite. The tone and thickness of the beam suggested something large, probably a culverin and hefted at waist height. Only a glancing hit, or Vorko would be dead.

Another beam salvo burned chromatically through the smoke but went wide. It seared the air. Zytos caught a vague silhouette, obscured even through his eye lenses. Braced on one knee, he brought his bolter up to his shoulder and released two long bursts in rapid succession.

The legionary hauling around the culverin jerked then spun as several shells hit him. A low detonation followed by a wet crunch of bone presaged the severing of his arm, blown off at the shoulder. The culverin went down. So did the Death Guard wielding it.

Numeon was already on his feet, blade drawn. Charging.

'Vulkan lives!'

It was never just a battle cry any more, not for him. It was a declaration of belief.

Zytos clamped his bolter behind his back, brought out his thunder hammer and followed Numeon into the flaming corridor.

Disorientated and slow to recover, the Death Guard were ill-prepared for what happened next.

Ahead of Zytos, Numeon was blurred by heat haze. Flames crept over his armour, but plumed away to nothing, their tendrils finding no purchase on the rapidly moving Salamander.

There was a sharp scrape of yielding battleplate, followed by parting flesh and separating bone as Numeon rammed *Draukoros* into one of the Death Guard. The concussive report of *Basilysk* followed, an almost point-blank bolt pistol shot to the face of a second legionary in dirty white.

Turning from his second opponent as the Barbaran's skull detonated gorily, Numeon wrenched his sword from the first legionary's gut. He snarled as he did it, savage, brutal, but economical with his effort. A decapitating blow took strength, but ended the first Death Guard with certain lethality.

Zytos breached the tunnel as Numeon engaged a third opponent. He wielded a battered-looking flail, lashing at the Salamander and wrapping the spiked chain

around his forearm. Numeon grunted with pain, but held on to the bolt pistol in his outstretched hand and aimed at the Death Guard. He brought the chain down, the legionary yielding with it, and cleaved the links apart with *Draukoros*.

A fourth and fifth Death Guard had drawn heavy blades, the weapons they had used to kill the civilian labourers. One of the legionaries went for Numeon but Zytos interceded. His thunder hammer swung once, a half-arc given the narrow confines. It met breastbone, neck and the right-hand side of the skull. The Death Guard didn't rise afterwards. He didn't even scream. Cauterised blood stench briefly filled the tunnel, as rancid as before. The flames were dying, eating up the oxygen but finding little to begin with to sate their hunger. Through dissipating smoke, Zytos caught sight of the fifth Death Guard removing something from his belt.

Bomb.

The word had scarcely formed in his subconscious when Numeon reacted to the threat. Already in close and almost grappling, he shoulder-barged his opponent into the path of the bomber.

He yelled, 'Protect yourselves!' as the legionary grabbed on to his armour and hauled Numeon after him. Both struggling warriors collapsed onto the third as a muffled detonation threw them upwards. Numeon rode the body of the legionary who grabbed him down again as the blast wave ebbed. As well as the concussive damage, something toxic had been unleashed. A sickly miasma thronged the source of the explosion and crept outwards. The Death Guard who had let off the dirty bomb was dead, ripped apart by his foiled artifice, but the other, the one who Numeon still grappled with, was still alive, if wounded.

Part of his war-helm had come away from his head revealing a grim countenance. Pallid-skinned with sunken eye sockets and a face bloated with some contagion, the Death Guard had either succumbed quickly to the toxin his comrade had released or he was diseased to begin with. The taint. It was not unknown for Destroyers to be consumed by the very weapons of war they wielded. Many knew that to be such a warrior in any Legion was a death sentence.

At some point during the fight, Numeon had let go of *Draukoros*. It was a poor tool at such close quarters, so he settled for seizing the diseased legionary's head with his gauntleted hands and smashing it repeatedly against the ground. Surprisingly, the skull came apart easily and disgorged some of the contents of the cranial vault over the Salamander's armour.

A seventh Death Guard was already down, and had been before the attack on

the tunnel. A strangely gibbous legionary, his swollen armour was riddled with bolter impacts.

'Numeon!'

The urgency in Zytos's voice made Numeon turn and take stock of his surroundings. He realised he was in the midst of the poison cloud. Hermetic seals on his armour bubbled with acidic reaction. The biometrics on his lens display went from amber to red as its hazard detection spiked suddenly.

Zytos had been thrown back by the bomb detonation. As soon as he came to his senses and saw the manner of the incendiary the Death Guard had used, he backed off further.

His own armour seals were damaged too, but still functional. Though under strain, his rebreather still functioned. Barely. For now he was not contaminated. As for Numeon…

Vorko and Dakar reared up in the sergeant's peripheral vision, the latter supporting the former, who had braced his flamer.

'Do it!' shouted Zytos, frantically gesturing at Gargo to step aside.

His flamer nozzle opened to produce a wide spread, Vorko unleashed a cone of fire into the tunnel. The last of the Death Guard and Artellus Numeon were consumed by it.

'Brother!' The horror in Gargo's voice was unmistakable. 'He has no mantle!'

When Numeon's armour had been forged anew, it had not come with a cloak of drake hide. Every legionary who possessed one had taken it from a beast he had hunted and flensed for that purpose. Legacy mattered. Tradition mattered. No son of Vulkan would brook breaking from it. Numeon's hide was gone, lost to war. He would need to take another. Until then he would have to bear the flames without one.

Vorko looked about to relent when Zytos told him firmly, 'Keep it up.'

The other Salamander looked unsure, as did Dakar.

'That's an order, Vorko. Keep it burning until that filth is gone. Numeon was born from fire – we all were. He will survive this.'

He must *survive this*…

Grimly, Vorko kept up the blaze.

Trapped inside the conflagration, they saw Numeon on his knees. His head was down and he held something in both hands, though amidst the smoke and heat haze it was impossible to tell what.

A strangled vox-cry, vying against the din of the flamer, reached Zytos and the others.

‘*Vulkan…*’

‘We’re burning him alive!’ shouted Gargo.

Zytos held up his hand in a gesture for Gargo to be still. He was watching the flames intently, watching the retinal display as it still registered harmful contamination inside the inferno.

‘*Vulkan…*’ the vox repeated, ‘*Vulkan… lives!*’

The contagion burned. Numeon burned.

‘Shut it down.’ Zytos practically wrenched Vorko’s hand off the firing trigger before running into the fire-wreathed tunnel a second time. Only now his motivation wasn’t the execution of betrayers, it was the salvation of a brother.

Scorched black walls hemmed in Numeon’s fire-scarred form. He remained crouched as Zytos approached, shrouded by an aura of shimmering heat. His joints had fused and smoke drooled off his armour like a creeping fog.

He clasped a hammer. A simple fuller. Vulkan’s sigil.

Lacquering on his armour cracked as he tried to move and overcome the resistance of his seared gyros.

Zytos reached him as he seized the clasps affixing helmet to gorget.

‘Try not to move, brother-captain,’ Zytos warned.

Hands trembling, Numeon removed his helm. If any contaminant remained it would infect him, but the helm was useless and an impediment.

‘I must, Zytos, if we are to cleanse this place,’ Numeon rasped. As he slowly got up, the baked-on soot veneer over his armour began to flake away. So did the paint, leaving hot, bare ceramite beneath.

He glanced at Igen Gargo, who stared back.

‘I commend you on the armour plate, black-smiter,’ said Numeon. ‘I didn’t know it could withstand heat like that.’

‘Nor I,’ Gargo confessed, numbly accepting Numeon’s proffered hand.

‘And the taint?’ asked Zytos, stepping into their eyeline. ‘Are you free of whatever was unleashed?’

Biometrics in his armour told Zytos the area was cleansed but it couldn’t offer an insight into Numeon’s condition.

‘I am…’ Numeon said at length, ‘…untouched, I believe.’

‘Xathen is close, we could return you to–’

‘As I have already said, Zytos,’ Numeon interrupted, ‘we must go on. All of–’

The words stuck in his mouth, held fast by the clenched fist of the Death Guard who had risen up and seized his throat. The legionary’s one arm marked him out as the wielder of the culverin. He had moved so quickly, so silently through the

occluding smoke that none of the Salamanders had seen him until he was already choking Numeon's life from him.

Before the others could react, Numeon had wrenched the Ultramarian gladius from its hilt and rammed it up into the Death Guard's chin. He pushed so hard it came out again through the crown of his war-helm. Emitting a gargled curse in Barbaran, the Death Guard held on for a second longer then fell, dead.

Numeon slumped back, prising the gauntleted fingers off his neck.

'Death Guard…' he stooped to retrieve *Draukoros,* then bent to wrench the gladius from its skull sheath, '…don't go down easily.'

Zytos wanted to say something, but time was ebbing for the people of Rampart. The Salamanders quickly moved on.

War had broken out amongst the core power generators, staged around three immense electro-kinetic turbines. Each generator provided light, heat and artificial atmosphere to the geodesic domes of Rampart. They were fortified, built into a deep basin surrounded by aegis lines of auto turrets and manned weapon emplacements. Were the generators to be destroyed or compromised in any way, Rampart would die and its indentured populace with it. Here was where the survivors, the human workers and their families, had chosen to gather for a final stand.

Here, the cudgel of the Death Guard fell hardest.

Fourteen legionaries in the dirty white of the XIV strode into frenzied suppressing fire. Las-beams and solid shot caromed off their armour, but did little more than stall them. Even then the delay was fractional.

Three aegis lines lay in ruins. Smoke streamed from squat gun towers, bodies were strewn over broken barricades. Some were aflame. The Death Guard stomped over the corpses and the ruins of their defences implacably and without regard for the dying and the wounded. It was methodical, efficient. Inexorable.

Slowly and purposefully, they withered down their opposition until only a desperate few remained.

'No wall of martyrs will hold them,' said Dakar, taking cover behind the broad archway leading into the generator chamber.

The Salamanders had entered behind the Death Guard. Reacting to a warning from their comrades now slain in the tunnel, a small cadre had turned and begun to lay down fire.

Gargo pointed to several dead legionaries, entangled in the wreckage.

'The Death Guard are not unbloodied.'

‘Look high, to the north-east,’ said Numeon. ‘He’s the reason.’

Zytos saw him too, a legionary in grey battleplate. No discernible iconography or rank markings and an unfamiliar armour variant that even at distance looked advanced.

He had a bolter pressed to his shoulder and was shooting Death Guard from one of the gun towers. Shots came sparingly, slowly. He was running low on ammunition.

‘The “Angel” described by Ushamann?’ Gargo suggested.

‘Perhaps,’ answered Zytos, watching the warrior keenly.

‘Is he an ally, then?’ asked Dakar.

‘The enemy of my enemy…’ said Numeon. ‘It doesn’t matter. He’ll be dead soon if we don’t act.’

Zytos nodded, decided.

‘Let’s find out where his allegiance lies.’

Still wounded, Vorko stayed behind but not before he released a jet of burning promethium that set the XIV rearguard aflame. They fought on regardless, but the fire impeded their efficacy enough for the rest of the Salamanders to slip beyond the threshold and into the chamber unharmed.

‘Use the wreckage,’ said Zytos. He held up his fore and index fingers. ‘Two and two, disperse and outflank.’

Orders given, the Salamanders obeyed. Numeon went with Zytos, and Gargo with Dakar. They quickly got in close, eye to eye as was their favoured tactic. Already burning, injured and compromised, the four legionaries in the rearguard did not last long.

Recognising a more serious threat, the Death Guard commander shouted an order and the vanguard hunkered down as the rest turned and engaged.

From his parapet, the Angel in grey seemed to notice his new allies and laid down fire to prevent the Death Guard bringing their full strength against the Salamanders.

Shells were crashing against the ruined barricades where they took cover, not far from the Death Guard gun line.

‘Break them now or not at all, brothers!’ shouted Zytos and leapt over the barricade. A round clipped his shoulder guard. A glancing blow, it nearly staggered him but he recovered his balance enough to fire back.

Either side of him, Dakar and Gargo moved up, each laying down heavy bursts. A Death Guard lurched forwards, his faceplate exploding outwards from the round in the back of his head. His comrade next to him half turned, trying to find

the shooter to enact some vengeance.

Dakar shot him through the neck.

Only six Death Guard remained.

Numeon unleashed *Basilysk* in a wide spread, aiming to distract, not annihilate. One-eyed, his depth perception was compromised. He favoured a blade anyway and only needed his brothers to get him close enough to use one.

Zytos led the others, he, Gargo and Dakar advancing steadily. From the threshold, Vorko swapped flamer for sidearm, the Death Guard now beyond the former's effective range. Percussive bolt pistol fire sounded from the distance.

A faint *chank* signalled an empty breech and a spent clip came from above. Dropping his bolter, the grey legionary leapt from his perch and landed hard in front of the enemy vanguard. He and Numeon formed up, the enemy between them.

'Advance!' Zytos urged the Salamanders on as the Death Guard fought back fiercely. Several who had taken strong hits had pulled themselves up, living proof of the Legion's famed resilience.

Dakar went down, struck in the plastron. Burnt and broken metal exploded from his draconic faceplate as he fell, half turning.

Amber flashed up on Zytos's retinal display, indicating an injury to Dakar.

Another barricade, another powerful vault over it.

Numeon raced ahead, weaving between scant cover. His fire-blackened armour was riddled with dents and heavily scored. He paid it no mind. Five strides separated him from the Death Guard, who had given up trying to shoot down their enemies and drawn blades instead.

Heavy black blades shone dully in the wan light of the generator chamber.

'Mistake,' Zytos muttered, unsheathing his hammer.

Below, the turbines roared to a fever pitch. In the depths of the sink beneath the chamber, arc lightning crackled between two blurring nodes. Industrial-grade, grilled walkways transected both turbines, wide and thick enough to carry several tanks abreast.

Zytos's boots rang loudly as he hurled his body across them.

An errant flash from below illuminated his battleplate, throwing the fangs of his helm and the armour's saurian aspect into sharp relief.

A kukra swung at him, wielded by fists encased in steam-pinned gauntlets. This one's armour looked dense and unyielding. His faceplate had a solitary slit where two hard eyes glared murderously.

Sparks sprang from the hammer's haft as Zytos fended off the blow. It was

heavy and jarred his shoulder, but he wouldn't yield to it.

Ahead, he caught a glimpse of Numeon tearing the fangs of *Draukoros* across a Death Guard's stomach. Metal, mesh and skin parted. Entrails spilled from a ruddy gash. The stink of necrotic flesh grew overwhelming.

A second blow forced his attention back to his enemy, who spat something at him in ugly Barbaran. Zytos ignored it and spun his hammer around, head to pommel. The traitor rocked back as his own momentum was turned against him.

Zytos kept the hammer circling, swinging it up as it reached its nadir, crushing pelvis and abdomen in a single actinic blow. Corposant roiled off the Death Guard's body as he collapsed. The kukra clattering uselessly away was the last thing Zytos heard as he moved on.

After that, it was over in short order. Though they were hard to kill, the Death Guard were gutted and torn apart by superior warriors.

Not least of whom was the legionary clad in grey, his gladius dripping with Barbaran blood.

Zytos had seen him claim two heads in hand-to-hand combat. His fighting style was brutal, bullish. Not a fencer, more of a pugilist. Gargo fought in a similar fashion.

As the battle ended, a lull fell upon the generator chamber in spite of the raucous turbines.

Numeon had reached their strange ally first. Gargo and Zytos were quick to join him until all three surrounded him in a half-circle.

'You have my gratitude,' he said, in a deep but not uncultured voice. He sounded a little strained, perhaps injured. The warrior glanced over his shoulder. 'And that of these people.'

Behind him, the labourers of Rampart had begun to show their faces. Most were women and children, though why anyone would want to bring their families to a place like this defied explanation. Desperate men, Zytos supposed and felt a pang of sympathy for these poor wretches trying to eke out a living from bare
rock.

Many of Nocturne did the same, and he did not pity them. He wondered why that was.

'Gargo,' he said, watching the grey legionary but not acknowledging his thanks just yet, 'see to Dakar. Get him back on his feet.

This might not be over yet.

A quick glance at Numeon, who had met Zytos's gaze, suggested he thought the

same.

'Name yourself, brother,' Numeon said to the grey legionary. He wasn't asking.

'I never realised sons of Nocturne were so suspicious,' the warrior answered.

'Aye, I'm sure. Our continued survival makes us so. Now, name yourself, or shall I have my sword loosen your lips?'

He kept *Draukoros* aimed at the grey legionary's chest. One lunge, a quick thrust would be all it would take.

Zytos observed both warriors keenly. His thoughts betrayed his loyalty to Numeon, as he was forced to admit the outcome of a fight between these two was far from certain.

The grey legionary raised his hand in surrender.

'Brother Kaspian Hecht,' he said.

'We will have questions, Brother Hecht,' Numeon replied. 'Not least of which concerning why you are here and how you come to have the mark of the Sigillite on your armour.'

Zytos masked his surprise behind his faceplate. He saw it now too, the unmistakable eye of Malcador surreptitiously engraved into the legionary's grey armour by meson beam.

'But for now,' Numeon continued, 'we are escorting you and these people out of Rampart. I cannot guarantee your safety if you stay.' Behind Hecht, the civilians had begun to emerge from hiding and the Pyre captain spared them a glance.

'And if I refuse?' asked Hecht.

'I have a feeling you won't.'

The clatter of booted feet made the legionaries turn suddenly at the prospect of Death Guard reinforcements.

Upon seeing Xathen and his squad, armed but without enemies to fight, they lowered their weapons.

'Did we miss the battle?' he asked, disappointed. With so many weapons, Xathen looked like a one-man army standing at the threshold to the generator chamber.

Vorko gave him a consoling slap on the shoulder.

'Don't feel bad, brother-sergeant, there may yet be more of them.'

Xathen gave the flamer trooper a withering glare then asked, 'Who's he?' and gestured to Hecht.

Zonn's voice came over the vox before anyone could answer.

'*Brothers, they have found us.*'

‘They?’ asked Zytos.

‘*The third gunship is airborne and has our position.*’

‘Zonn,’ said Numeon, ‘whatever happens, do not let that vessel off Rampart. No one must know we are here and whom we carry.’

‘*That will not be a problem, brother-captain. They are not attempting to flee.*’

‘What?’

‘*They are trying to kill us.*’

They left the complex at a run, Zytos barking orders for a rapid redeployment and response to the genuine Death Guard threat. Gargo would stay behind with Dakar and Vorko. The de facto Apothecary needed to get them fit enough for duty before the Salamanders were ready to leave Rampart. That meant standing and able to fight. They would also gather together the civilians for transit to the *Charybdis,* assuming they still had a vessel to ferry them.

It fell to Xathen to keep an eye on Hecht. The mysterious grey legionary was a rogue element Zytos could not ignore. Then there was Numeon…

He drove ahead of the others at a ferocious pace. If the Death Guard knew the Salamanders were no longer on Macragge, if they discovered they had Vulkan…

Zytos knew the risks. He knew entering the Ruinstorm was madness even without the presence of Death Guard at their heel, but Numeon’s behaviour bordered on reckless.

In spite of that, Zytos managed to emerge from the dome tunnel just behind him.

All eyes were drawn to the murky sky above, where a Death Guard gunship had unleashed its pinion-mounted heavy bolters, shredding the ablative armour of the Salamanders transport.

‘Get their attention,’ said Zytos.

Xathen slowed, taking aim with his bolter.

Numeon was firing too, but his sidearm did not have the range, or he the accuracy with only one eye.

Xathen’s shell struck the plate casing of the port-side engine turbine, lodged and exploded. A one in fifty shot. Pluming black smoke whirled in a dirty spiral as the spluttering vents pushed out the cloud then sucked it back in.

The ship pitched, losing some lift, but the pilot adjusted and it levelled out. Winged, but not down. The gunship swung its nose around towards the Salamanders. With a high-pitched whine, lascannon capacitors powered up.

A fusillade of shells hammered the Death Guard vessel with little impact as the

legionaries on the ground fought to bring it down, but without heavier weapons it would take a miracle.

Below the gunship, the rear ramp of *Draconis* crashed down and a figure in blue-green battleplate staggered out.

'Is that Ushamann?' asked Xathen, not trusting to luck and firing off sustained bursts like the others.

Zytos divided his attention between Hecht and Numeon, who had at least slowed to allow the others to stand with him. A flare of pellucid light seized his attention, drawing his eye to the Librarian.

A storm crackled across Ushamann's fingertips, coalescing quickly into a billowing thunderhead of mass and substance. He flung out one arm to direct an arc of lightning that stabbed into the armoured flank of the gunship like a lance.

No… not a lance. It did not merely strike, it writhed and bored. A serpent of heaven-fire coursed throughout the ship. Minor lightning arcs were rippling across the fuselage, cooking off the ammunition in the pinion-mounts. The frontal glacis suddenly webbed with cracks. Ushamann threw out his other hand, unleashing a second bolt. It slithered hungrily like the first, blowing out one of the engines. A plume of smoke and fire punched out the side hatch of the ship as something within exploded.

It pitched, the gunship, suddenly uncertain of its velocity and ability to stay aloft.

Figures inside the hold scrambled to the blown side hatch, trying to jump out, but the gunship was thrashing in its death throes now. None made it out before the fuel tank ignited and a ball of flame lit up the sky in place of the gunship like the ephemeral dawning of a second sun.

Wreckage and bodies fell. The Salamanders made sure there were no survivors. Xathen was particularly ruthless. Only when it was over and they stood amongst the ruins of the vessel and its slain cargo, did anyone approach Ushamann.

'Brother…' said Zytos, reaching for the Epistolary, but he stayed his hand when he saw the veins of corposant wreathing Ushamann's armour.

Ushamann was on his knees but had enough strength to hold up his hand.

'A moment…'

'You were unconscious.'

'I was compelled to rouse.'

'Compelled?'

'In my stupor, I beheld a vision.'

Ushamann craned his neck to look up. Unlike Zytos, he wasn't wearing his

helmet, so his blazing azure eyes were visible.

'Of our father, of Vulkan. He told me I had to rise.'

Numeon held the sigil.

'Vulkan lives…' he breathed, and all who were in his presence felt the conviction in his words. His belief.

Even Kaspian Hecht.

TWENTY-TWO

Interrogative

Battle-barge Charybdis*, interrogation chamber*

‘Are you alone?’

‘Here, in this darkened cell?’ asked Hecht, gesturing to the walls, the door, the near-lightless confines.

‘It is not a cell, but it could be,’ Zytos reminded him.

He stayed in the shadows at the edge of the interrogation room, arms folded.

Var’kir was the one asking the question, his skull-faced helmet sitting in front of him on the circular table, staring hollow-eyed at Hecht.

Hecht spared Zytos a glance but only that. He had been told to remove his helm, so complied. A stern, war-weary face regarded them. Hecht’s origin was hard to determine, his skin lightly tanned, his bearing patrician. At first Zytos had thought Ultramarine or Imperial Fists legionary, but there was an edge, a dangerous vitality uncharacteristic of either.

Not a Raven, the flesh palette was wrong. Bionics were not in evidence, so that ruled out the Iron Hands too. The melanchrome mutation was also absent, though Zytos reckoned he or Var’kir would have instantly recognised a fellow Nocturnean.

‘Alone in your mission,’ Var’kir clarified for the obstreperous legionary.

‘I wasn’t. There was another. I had orders to meet him.’

‘On Rampart?’

‘No. I was attacked, my ship practically destroyed and I left for dead. I drifted, with only my armour to ward me against the void, until a passing freighter found me and took me to Rampart.’

‘That was fortunate.’

‘I do not believe in luck.’

Zytos snorted at the grey legionary’s impudence, but Var’kir lifted his hand a fraction to let him know he had control of the situation.

‘We make our own,’ said the Chaplain.

‘I believe in the Emperor’s judgement. He deemed my survival just.’

Var’kir’s eyes narrowed.

‘Who were you meeting? What was his name?’

‘I am not at liberty to say.’

‘Consider your liberty very carefully.’

‘You won’t incarcerate me,’ replied Hecht with confidence.

‘Is that so?’

Hecht nodded. ‘I am a sworn servant of Malcador the Sigillite.’ He turned his shoulder towards the meagre light. ‘See his mark upon my armour.’

‘We see it,’ said Var’kir. ‘Are your orders from Terra? Do you know if it still endures?’ There was an urgency to the Chaplain’s questioning, despite his previously cool demeanour.

The implications if Terra did still stand were sizeable, not least for Guilliman’s second empire. Contingency was one thing, but if such an undertaking, the founding of Imperium Secundus, had taken place with the Throneworld in dire need then it would stand as a great shame for all involved. Heresy, even.

Hecht appeared to falter, as he considered his response. It became apparent his hesitation was born of uncertainty.

‘I have not set eyes on Terra for a long time, nor have I had any contact with Lord Malcador beyond my original orders. But my mission is mine alone to know. Even your volatile psyker could not wrench it from my mind, and any tortures you might devise would yield nothing also. You have no choice but to give me my leave. For now, our paths converge. From what I’ve seen you have few warriors aboard this vessel and you are obviously headed somewhere inhospitable to be so cautious.’

‘Our caution and our destination are no business of yours,’ snapped Zytos.

Hecht showed his palms in a gesture of compliance.

‘I do not plan to make it so. I am without a ship, my comrade lost, probably dead. For now, I find myself in the company of allies. Let me do Malcador’s will unimpeded. As soon as I can procure another ship, I will leave you to whatever it is you are doing out here in the void.’

‘Where we are headed that might not be possible,’ said a third figure, one Hecht had not noticed until it had turned to him.

‘And where is that, might I ask?’

The burning embers of Numeon’s eyes blazed as he came into the light.

‘Into the Ruinstorm.’

Gargo read from a hand-held bio-scanner and frowned.

‘Does that expression denote good or bad news?’ asked Ushamann, sitting up on a medi-slab in the ship’s apothecarion.

‘Your vitals appear fine,’ Gargo replied, putting down the bio-scanner, ‘but I am not an Apothecary. I can patch up wounds, my physiological knowledge is lacking.’

‘Good news, then.’

Gargo raised an eyebrow.

‘How so?’

‘Ignorance is oft preferable to truth,’ said Ushamann, climbing off the slab to stand beside Gargo.

Even in his battleplate, the black-smiter only came up to the Librarian’s nose. Ushamann’s slight frame possessed height but not width to eclipse his brother.

‘You can’t believe that.’

‘I do, Gargo.’ Three stripes of deep red hair, shaved into drake heads, divided the Librarian’s otherwise smooth head. His eyes were perpetually narrowed, as if scrutinising, measuring, and he had the weary expression of a warrior who had seen too much.

Gargo knew Isstvan V had been harsh to Ushamann. He had lost his mentor, and many of his Librarius who had been reduced to line troopers during the massacre. All that power… shackled and denied to them.

What a difference it might have made.

What was it Xathen often said? We have all lost something.

‘This war is an ugly truth,’ Gargo reasoned. ‘Brother killing brother. It’s abhorrent, but we must confront it.’

‘How shall we confront the loss of Terra, brother?’

‘We cannot know that Terra is lost.’

‘True, and yet we must consider it. Our guest, this Hecht, claims to serve Malcador and he appears to be telling the truth. But his origin is no proof that the Emperor still rules the Imperium – only that he did whilst Hecht was last there.’

Gargo held in his anger. ‘You cannot believe this, Ushamann.’

‘Why not?’

‘Terra *must* endure. The Emperor *must* endure.’

‘Then why was Guilliman raising a second Imperium with Macragge as its epicentre? By confronting this war, we face an unpleasant truth. This is no different. It is the same for Vulkan, also.’

Gargo frowned, uncertain. He appeared younger in that moment. ‘Father?’

‘Our father, yes. What of Vulkan? Are you glad to be furnished with the truth?’

‘What truth do you mean?’

‘That he is dead and we are ferrying a corpse into the deadliest warp storm in known history.’

‘Numeon believes he lives.’

‘And is that the truth you choose to believe?’

Gargo had no immediate answer.

Ushamann made to leave the apothecarion. His back to Gargo, he stopped at the threshold.

‘Ignorance helped me to believe our father lived. I strived for that belief. It gave me hope. Then hope died and I had vengeance, but now Numeon tells us our father lives in spite of the evidence of our eyes. I saw a vision, I beheld the primarch, but do you know what I felt when I searched Vulkan’s mind, Gargo?’

His silence suggested he did not.

‘Emptiness. A tomb. Truth was not so appealing after that.’

‘You think it’s false hope?’

‘Have you ever looked out onto the world and felt a profound sense of unease?’

‘Sometimes. Before battle. Before Isstvan V. I think we all did that day, as if we could taste it on the air. Is your vision a warning of calamity, Ushamann? Is that what you mean?’

‘I saw fire… endless, life-eclipsing fire. Immolus.’

‘The Unbound Flame?’

‘It was his epitaph, was it not?’

Gargo averted his gaze. It had been Vulkan’s epitaph, but it was different now. Numeon had returned. If he lived, then so could the primarch.

‘I feel a profound sense of unease, Gargo. It grows the longer I am on this ship.’ He paused, perhaps wanting to find words of reassurance but deciding he had none, then changed the subject. ‘I am needed on the bridge.’

Ushamann left. Gargo watched him depart in silence.

It would be easy to succumb to doubt. Numeon’s beliefs defied the rational and embraced a kind of faith that bordered on religious.

Ushamann had chosen not to trust in the evidence of his rational mind, but Gargo had seen something too. He had seen Numeon endure a baptism that

should have killed him, and the only explanation was a scrap of armour clutched with such conviction that it turned away flame and defied death.

He decided to seek solace in the forge, where the fire and smoke would cleanse him of all doubt.

Gargo could mend bones to a degree. He could staunch the flow of blood and knit flesh where necessary. With metal he could perform the miraculous, but only Numeon and his belief could mend their broken Legion.

Everything he knew told Gargo that the dead didn't return. Everything he felt allowed him to arrive at a different conclusion.

His declaration was quiet and spoken to an empty room, but it was not weak.

'Vulkan lives.'

TWENTY-THREE

Our legacy

Battle-barge Charybdis*, embarkation deck*

Mercifully for the intake of refugees, the ship they cowered aboard was more than large enough to accommodate them.

Upon the return of the *Draconis,* Zytos had informed the shipmaster of the civilians crammed aboard the gunship's hold. Almost fifty of them, survivors of Rampart.

They looked sickly, weak and broken. The sergeant had assured Adyssian that none were infected by the Death Guard toxins unleashed upon their kith and kin. Even after he had read the report from Igen Gargo, Adyssian still wanted to see for himself.

A shipmaster must know the cargo of his vessel, every last scrap of it.

A glas attached over his left eye allowed Adyssian to observe each refugee in detail from the high gantry overhead. They could not see him – who would look anyway? – but he could see them well enough. Men, women and even some children wearing overalls and the remnants of atmosphere suits stared dully around the vast, shadowy hold.

Their saviours had since departed, leaving the *Draconis* for the enginseers to run maintenance over. Zonn would be back again soon. He always was.

Adyssian watched the refugees move in a herd, huddled together by fear, desperately clinging to one another. It saddened him to see it, what the galaxy had made of his species. The lesser, non-genetically enhanced version of it.

'Is this what we shall become?' he whispered to himself, but the words almost caught in his throat when he saw the girl.

He nearly missed her, she was so small, so young. She hid behind a woman's

storm-shawl, not her mother judging by the disregard the older woman showed her. It wasn't the fact the girl was orphaned that gave Adyssian such pause. It was her face. Her timid, but gentle bearing. She clung to that storm-shawl so tenderly…

'Throne!' Adyssian gasped. He had to brace himself against the rail of the overlooking gantry to stop from falling forwards. Heart racing. Breath hammering through his chest.

'Maelyssa…'

Tears ran down Adyssian's face but didn't interfere with the visual feed from his glas.

Before the *Charybdis,* before service to the Great Crusade, he had had a daughter. But the universe had been cruel, and her life was abruptly taken. Religion was a fading concept back then but Adyssian had prayed. He had prayed to the Throne, clutching a proscribed treatise in his hands. He had it still, in spite of the danger it represented to his career and his freedom. *Lectitio Divinitatus.* The posited belief that the Emperor on Terra was a god.

Adyssian's prayers remained unanswered. He had put the book away, and forgotten about its lies. Until now.

'Not her…' he mumbled, gripping the rail so hard his knuckles whitened. 'Not Maelyssa.'

He took off the glas and left the gantry. Ever since her death, Adyssian had become better at compartmentalisation. He called upon that skill again now, and by the time he had reached the bridge, he was utterly composed. No one would ever know the secret pain hidden away in his heart.

No one.

Cartographs and old vellum maps lay strewn about the strategium. Several pairs of compasses were scattered amongst the star charts.

Adyssian stared at them. He had being doing so for the last few seconds. It was coming up to a full minute when Gullero broke the silence.

'Without the Astronomican or the Pharos to guide us, we are confined to short, calculated jumps.'

'Breaching the storm more than once turns my blood cold, Arikk.'

Adyssian looked up from the charts to his first officer.

Arikk Gullero was young, like Adyssian, but with wispy blond hair and pale grey eyes. A Terran, seconded to the *Charybdis'*s service.

'I'm not sure Circe could take it, either.'

‘What other choice is there?’ asked Gullero.

Adyssian sighed, resigned to their fate. His hands were braced against the table, his fingers splayed across the maps as if hoping he could discern some strategy by merely touching them.

‘It would be arduous, shipmaster,’ said Circe.

She was hooded, and lithe in her dark robes. The Navigator kept her head bowed throughout the exchange. Her bare feet made almost no sound on the deck as she had slowly circled the strategium table to review Adyssian’s charts.

She looked up, revealing sharp green eyes like milk-jade and the plain silver circlet she wore around her head to conceal her mutation from the shipmaster and the rest of the crew.

‘But I am strong enough to bear it.’

Adyssian’s expression suggested he had his doubts.

Circe’s body was feeble, drained by her exertions in guiding the *Charybdis.* An ash-wood walking cane supported her skeletal frame. Thin fingers, not unlike talons, curled around the serpent head at its top.

‘We have no knowledge of what we’ll face once we jump. You’ll be blind, Circe.’

She smiled, her blade-thin lips curling up like wire.

‘A Navigator is never blind.’ She gestured to the strategium table and the swathe of calculations and equations scribed upon several leaves of parchment resting upon the various maps. ‘Between your cartographic expertise and my sight, we shall prevail. We will reach Nocturne. As Lieutenant Gullero says, what other choice do we have?’

Adyssian returned a weary smile to Circe.

‘None, milady. I just wanted to be sure you knew what this meant and that you were agreeable to it.’

‘Had I not been,’ said Circe, ‘what would you have done?’

‘Turned the *Charybdis* around.’

She laughed gently.

‘Defy the fearsome Drakes? You jest.’

‘I do,’ Adyssian admitted. ‘You will need Ushamann’s help.’

Circe’s expression soured at the mention of the Librarian.

‘Yet I do not wish for it. A cloak of shadows hangs about his neck.’

‘Aye, he’s bleak, but he’s also strong. Use him as a crutch.’

Circe nodded, composed and dignified as ever.

‘Is that all, shipmaster?’ she asked.

Adyssian took another look at the charts, quickly reviewing his and Gullero's calculations. He nodded.

'Rest. It'll be soon.'

Circe left the strategium for her sanctorum.

In her absence, Arikk Gullero spoke frankly to his shipmaster.

'This will likely kill her.'

'She knows,' Adyssian replied sadly, feeling poorer in her wake. 'We all know.'

'Are you prepared for that?'

'I am not,' Adyssian answered honestly, 'and yet still I will do what must be done.'

Through the expansive aperture of the ship's oculus there was a growing turmoil. Lightless black, as if the stars had been smothered by a consuming fog, lurked ahead.

So immense was the Ruinstorm that entire systems had been enveloped by it. No missive could breach it, and indeed no message had been received from the Throneworld since even before Lorgar had created this immatereological abomination. It was a wound that began at Calth and had spread cancerously across Ultramar, and then the whole galaxy.

Few doubted that Horus had already reached Terra and sacked it.

Adyssian had neither the wit nor the craft to see the storm for what it was, but he knew that it was there. As soon as they dropped into warp, he *would* see it; he would behold a vision of hell.

'Zonn?' Zytos had been about to leave interrogation when the Techmarine hailed him across the vox.

Hecht was still in there for now, incarcerated just as he had suggested he would be. Var'kir watched him. Numeon had left much earlier. Mark of the Sigillite or not, no chances would be taken with the grey-armoured legionary. Much during the war had not been as it first appeared.

'*Sergeant,*' came the mechanised voice of Far'kor Zonn. '*I have been examining all the data gleaned from my infiltration of Rampart.*'

'You found something?' Zytos replied.

'*I did.*'

'Then tell me, Zonn. Don't wait for the next interrogative.'

'*A stream of vox-communication. Buried. A pulse or beacon, I have to determine exactly. It originated from the Death Guard ship, the vessel that attacked the* Draconis.'

Zytos felt his blood suddenly turn cold.

'To the starship in orbit?' he guessed.

'*Yes, sergeant.*'

'Was it received?'

'*Every scrap of data I possess would suggest that.*'

'So, our enemies know we are out here.' Zytos almost said it to himself.

'*I am afraid it would appear so.*'

'Anything else?'

'*One more thing. A second vox transmission emanated from the starship seconds after it received the initial pulse.*'

'Vulkan's blood…' breathed Zytos. 'They sent our whereabouts to another ship, possibly even a fleet.'

'*The former is extremely probable. Should I convey these findings to Brother-Captain Numeon? I have been having some difficulty locating him.*'

'I know where he is,' said Zytos, scowling. 'I'll inform the captain.'

He cut the link.

TWENTY-FOUR

Endless night

Cruiser Monarchia*, the Altar*

The ship had not been difficult to find. Amongst the many monitors, the barges and frigates, the freighters and barques all departing Macragge, it was easily the largest.

Quor Gallek had smiled when his shipmaster brought word of its discovery.

'*Charybdis,*' he murmured, reading the vessel's designation off a data-slate that he immediately discarded. 'In Grekan myth it was a denizen of the deep, so massive its maw drank in the sea, a swirling vortex that dragged ships to their doom.'

Quor Gallek looked up from his kneeling position in the Altar. His crimson robes spilled across the cold, slabbed floor. They were heavy with blood and gleamed wetly in the flickering brazier light. No lumens or phosphor-lamps were permitted here. This was ancient. Primordial. Ritual. Just like the chamber he currently occupied.

'Poetic, isn't it?' he asked of his armoured shadow.

'I care not,' uttered a deep, rich voice. 'Unless it means a sooner reckoning.'

'Their destination is a maelstrom,' said Quor Gallek as he was rising to his feet. 'Surely the irony of that and the name of their ship is not lost on you, Degat.'

'I didn't say I could not see it. I said I didn't care. Will it lead us to him?'

Degat remained stock still, arms folded. They were bare in the style of the XII, but Degat was devoted to the Word. It was etched into his skin, dark enough that the hue of his flesh was changed by the religious ink.

Zealot. Warrior.

Cut from the same dark cloth as Barthusa Narek.

Similar cloth, given recent revelations.

'It will lead us to the fulgurite,' Quor Gallek answered truthfully, 'which, in turn, will give us Narek. And more besides.'

'Vulkan?'

'Yes,' said Quor Gallek.

'You knew?'

'I suspected. The soulless talk, if properly motivated. Their knowledge can be useful, if not always trusted.' Quor Gallek shook his head. 'Elias always used them as blunt instruments and look where that got him, the fool. A being that powerful, hurtling through the ether… It does not go unnoticed.'

'Macragge is a fortress,' said Degat. 'How did you manage to get them to leave?'

'Grief. I did not lie to Numeon when I said I knew his thoughts. I knew everything. His desperation makes him predictable. I knew the threat of Xenut Sul would provide the gentle push he needed.'

'A ship, vulnerable and alone, instead of a fortress…' Degat's eyes twitched, as close to an expression of amusement as he ever got.

Quor Gallek nodded.

'All three for the taking.'

'Narek dies first. Do what you want with the rest,' said Degat.

'I have already struck the bargain with our allies,' Quor Gallek replied as he paced the room, padding slowly and quietly on bare feet. A small blade in his hand shimmered as it caught the light.

The light revealed other things too. He and Degat were not the Altar's only inhabitants. And this was not the only Altar on the ship. Quor Gallek had named them thusly on account of their ancient heritage and sacrificial purpose. Every one of the eight Altars had been hewn from Colchisian stone, once grey but now almost crimson with the amount of blood spilled over them.

Several transhuman prisoners were chained up around the octagonal structure, one for each point. Eight Altars, eight prisoners, eight points.

'Eight times eight times eight…'

Quor Gallek recited the ritual words in a solemn undertone. He eyed the first offering, reaching for the gag over its mouth. He liked to hear them first, to hear their confessions and their lies. Death brought out truth. It was their penance for shunning true gods. Primordial annihilation awaited.

Even for Degat.

Even for him.

Quor Gallek accepted that when his purpose had ended, he too would become part of the great cull. The extinction of everything.

Degat disturbed the Preacher's inner thoughts.

'What if they endure the Ruinstorm?' he asked, rasping loudly through the snarling rebreather. It only covered his mouth and nose. His eyes were visible, unshielded by visor glass. They gleamed like ice chips, as searing as cryogen.

Quor Gallek smiled. He did so pityingly, for he was regarding the defiant face of the warrior in chains before him. Seizing the gag, he pulled it away.

'You won't break me,' a legionary growled through clenched teeth. He had the iron-hard skin of Medusa and his oil-black hair shimmered with sweat. A scar savaged his right eye, nearly annihilating the grim tattoo beneath it.

'I know,' Quor Gallek replied, sadly. 'I have always respected the courage of the Iron Hands.'

The legionary frowned, nonplussed. His good eye was drawn to the silver blade in Quor Gallek's hand. He sneered. 'Part the veil, unleash your fiends. You'll find no host in me.'

This one had experience fighting the Neverborn, then. Or perhaps he had met one of Quor Gallek's Unburdened like Xenut Sul.

'It doesn't work like that,' Quor Gallek told him.

'I fear no ensorcelled blade,' the prisoner spat.

'It's just a knife, although one you should really be familiar with.'

The legionary frowned again, making deep fissures in his craggy brow. His eyes widened when Quor Gallek drew the blade across his neck. The preacher had to carve a little. Medusan flesh was quite unyielding.

As the blood spewed from the carotid artery, the anticoagulants on the blade inhibiting Larraman clotting and condemning the subject to death, Quor Gallek smiled again.

'The sorcery comes with your blood, my erstwhile brother. Lorgar thanks you for your sacrifice.'

In a few minutes, the Iron Hands legionary was dead.

'They won't survive the Ruinstorm,' Quor Gallek told Degat, moving on to the second prisoner, his blade still bloody. 'I'm scripting a coda to the primarch's symphony. Its echoes will ripple across endless night and when it has them, when they falter… then we fall upon the Drakes and finish what was begun at Isstvan.'

TWENTY-FIVE

Our father's sons

Battle-barge Charybdis*, the sanctum*

It felt like a mausoleum, only less dignified. The cold and solemnity of the vault on Macragge had been exchanged for the cold and solemnity of a cargo hold. Numeon dubbed it the sanctum and, in many ways, Zytos supposed it was.

The memorial flame had been replaced by a phosphor-lume but this was still a grave and not a cryostasis chamber as some believed.

'Enter then, if you're going to.' Numeon didn't look up. He was crouched down in reverie, clutching the sigil as always and looking for any sign of life. At the Pyre captain's request, Zonn had rigged a bio-reader to the primarch's casket. Any faint rhythm, a stirring no matter how small, would be detected.

Nothing had changed. Vulkan remained in seemingly eternal slumber.

As he stepped across the sanctum's threshold, Zytos noticed blood on Numeon's hands. The sight of it trickling down the haft of the ceremonial fuller made Zytos uneasy.

'Our presence on Rampart did not go unnoticed.'

'Impossible, we brought down all their ships.'

'Not before one sent out a pulse.'

A tremor of consternation registered below Numeon's sightless eye.

'The Death Guard frigate?'

Zytos nodded.

'They'll come for us. Out of petty revenge, if nothing else.'

'Agreed. Your orders then?'

'Are your orders, sergeant. Do as you see fit. I shall maintain vigil here.'

Numeon glanced over when he realised Zytos was still there.

‘Something to say?’

‘On Rampart, you said something during the mission,’ Zytos began.

‘I said several things, brother. You must narrow it down.’

‘*My men,* you called them. Our battle-brothers, the sixty-six from Macragge. The Pyre.’

‘We had fewer than sixty-six on Rampart.’

‘You meant all of them. Respect me enough not to deny that.’

‘Respect you?’ Numeon scowled, rising to face him. ‘I thought I was respecting you. You led our brothers in the absence of our father, and kept them together. They should follow you, not my rank.’

‘You are our leader, now. If we make it back to Nocturne–’

‘*When* we make it back, brother,’ Numeon warned him.

‘On Nocturne, you will take us back into the war, give us purpose.’

‘We *have* a purpose. Vulkan is our purpose. He will rise again, just as he has risen before. I am not Legion Master, not whilst we have a primarch. If we are to succeed, I cannot believe in anything else.’

‘We are but one ship, cast into the void. Your beliefs could kill us all.’

Numeon’s declaration was emphatic. ‘I would sacrifice everything for this.’

Zytos tried reason. ‘Lead us, Numeon. You hide yourself in this tomb, waiting for a miracle. Step out of the shadows and into the light. It is madness to hold to this course.’

‘And what would you do, if not this? Stay on Macragge as a symbol of Guilliman’s fear?’

‘What fear?’ Zytos tried but could not keep the growl out of his voice.

‘That Terra is gone, the Emperor slain. You are willing to believe in that horror, but not that our father lives? Tell me, brother, when did you lose all hope?’

Zytos stared sadly.

‘When I looked upon his cold corpse.’

Something primal and anguished roared out of Numeon. Denial, anger, pain, frustration… emotions coalesced and warred for dominance. He tackled Zytos around the torso and bore him down despite the Themian’s bulk.

Hitting the deck hard, they raised a loud clamour as metal struck metal.

Zytos lashed out, punching Numeon in the face and staggering him.

‘You’ve asked for this,’ said Zytos, ‘every damn blow.’

Numeon blocked a right hook with his forearm, trapped it and landed a palm-strike to Zytos’s solar plexus. Armour plate dented.

Zytos grimaced, hurting. He grappled Numeon, pinning his arms and hurling

him against the cargo hold wall. Holding on, he began to tighten his grip.

Numeon's knee hit like a mace. Zytos grunted in pain and he released his grip a little. Using the respite, Numeon freed an arm and smashed his elbow down into Zytos's clavicle. Almost loose now, he brought up his knee again into the Themian's unprotected chin.

Zytos staggered back, momentarily stunned. Numeon let him wipe the blood from his mouth.

That was a mistake.

Zytos rushed him. A brutal shoulder-barge. A battering ram, clad in adamantium and ceramite, drove the air from Numeon's lungs and hoisted him off his feet. His head sprang back, jerked by the Themian's hard skull hitting his chin.

Crimson arced from Numeon's mouth.

In a brawl, momentum was everything. Zytos had the impetus. Numeon fought inertia. The blade of each hand, spring-loaded and unleashed into either side of the Themian's neck, put Numeon back on level terms.

Zytos sagged. He was choking.

Shrugging off unconsciousness, Numeon released an explosive jab that cracked his brother's plastron.

Falling, Zytos found nothing to grasp but air and slipped. He backed up and went low, almost down to his knee. A hail of blows came in, fast, powerful. His defence kept out the worst of it, but Zytos was reeling.

Swinging blind, he caught Numeon's midriff with his arm, held on and hurled him into the back of the cargo hold.

Though sprawling, Numeon was quickly on his feet but Zytos landed two right jabs followed by a crushing left hook that put him down again.

'What does this prove?' Zytos growled. Battered, bloody and bruised, his face had become a mask of pure rage.

Numeon's was no better.

He tried to rise. Zytos hit him again.

'Stay down,' he warned.

Glaring, snarling through blood-rimed teeth, Numeon attempted to rise again.

Zytos hit him harder.

'You'll have to kill me,' Numeon said, drooling blood.

'I believe you.'

All the anger in his face bled away as Zytos let his arms fall in a gesture of submission.

Unsteady, Numeon got up. A faltering step took him within striking distance.

Arm trembling, he raised his fist.

‘Our father may be dead, but we are brothers still,’ said Zytos. ‘Are we not enough?’

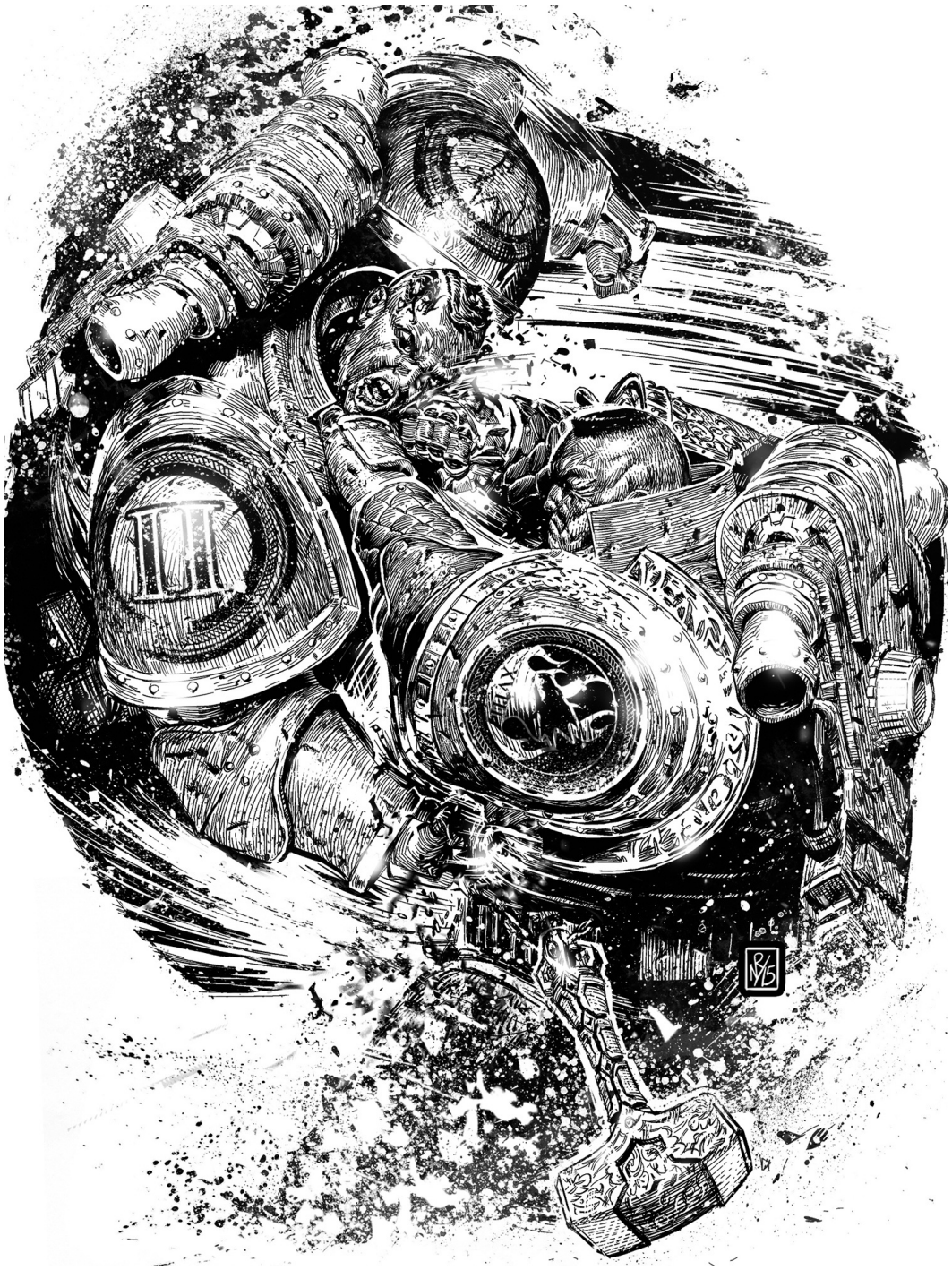
‘He is our primarch, Barek.’ Even saying it, Numeon knew it was no answer, no excuse. His fist unclenched. His arm dropped to his side. It was over.

Zytos walked away, weary, and left Numeon alone to wallow in anger and self-pity.

‘Alive or dead,’ he said, leaving, ‘this would not be Vulkan’s will.’

‘I ask for nothing but hope,’ Numeon uttered to his back.

‘Then give it to us. But not like this.’



Tensions flare between Numeon and Zytos

TWENTY-SIX

Broken brothers

Battle-barge Charybdis*, forges*

The metal bent and buckled, yielding to the blow.

Gargo struck again, harder, and the chime of his hammer rang discordantly through the heady air. The muscles in one shoulder burned and beneath his armour his skin ran with sweat, but he would not relent.

With a grunt, he struck a third time and split the greave apart. It needed rewelding and pinning before it could see service again.

Several other pieces, gorgets, vambraces, a dented cuirass, even a helm split across the join, lay on three metal workbenches in the *Charybdis'*s forges. Found below decks, near to the enginarium, the forges were immense but almost empty. With only sixty-six legionaries aboard the ship, Gargo had chosen one of the smaller forges equal to his needs.

It was brazier-lit, the air thick with heat and dark with smoke. Soot clung to the walls, crawling up the internal buttresses. An anvil dominated the middle of the chamber and it was here that Gargo toiled in isolation.

He had tasked himself with repairing the broken armour pieces from the mission to Rampart. Without imminent resupply or the possibility of reinforcement, the Salamanders could not afford to be profligate. Everything would be used and reused until it was broken beyond recall.

Gargo had reworked several pieces already and they glistened fresh from dousing, exuding a quivering aura of heat. Every artistic flourish had been restored, and the black-smiter's craft was almost without peer in the Legion with the exception of Master T'kell. Yet still he frowned whenever he looked at them. He glanced at the arm holding the tongs that snared the metal pieces in place. At

one time, it had been his preferred hand to hammer with. Now, it could only clamp metal in place.

He raised the fuller again, about to strike out a dent, when a voice from the darkness stopped him.

'What will become of us, blacksmith?'

Gargo turned to Xathen, who had been watching silently. A pall of smoke gusted from the corner of his mouth, inhaled from his rhaga pipe.

'How long have you been sitting there?'

'A while. What else is there to do while we sail the stars but wait?'

Gargo carefully set the fuller down. It clanked dully against the surface of the anvil. He left the greave he had been reforging, dissatisfied with his efforts anyway.

'Is that Vorko's?' Xathen asked.

'Yes.'

He nodded, impressed.

'Didn't think you would be able to fix it after a volkite.'

'It isn't fixed yet.'

'Hmm.'

'You need something, Xathen?'

'An answer to my question.'

'I don't know what will become of us. But with Vulkan we can be Legion again.'

'I've seen his body in that cargo bay Numeon is using for a shrine, if that's what you mean.'

'You don't believe Vulkan will rise again.'

'Isn't it somehow twisted to believe the dead can rise from the grave? Nothing that dies can ever come back the same.'

'During the ancient days of Nocturne, it was believed possible. Devotees of the Promethean creed would daub their faces in white ash as part of a ritual to bring about resurrection.'

'Did our Chaplain tell you that?' Xathen already knew that he had.

Var'kir knew much about the history of Nocturne, its customs and ceremonies. How they fitted into a secular galaxy, governed by the Imperial Truth, was a question no one had yet thought to ask, but it lingered, waiting, nonetheless.

'He spoke the creed. I listened. It only affirmed to me that Vulkan yet lives.'

Vulkan had tempered the creed and with his craft as a father and a black-smiter moulded his Legion into a better version of itself. From a spiral of self-

immolation, he had given them not only the means to survive, but to flourish. It wasn't in his deeds, but his wisdom.

Xathen believed in the creed too, but his focus tended towards the volatile and the incendiary, the supremacy of fire. Temperance and pragmatism were neglected concepts in his character.

'Alive, dead…' Xathen shrugged. 'I just want to kill traitors, brother. I breathe vengeance, my sustenance is retribution. I just want them to burn.'

'And what about a higher cause?'

'There is nothing else, nothing higher than that for me.'

'Then why come here at all?'

'I was bored.'

Xathen got to his feet, done with self-flagellation for now. He doused the rhaga pipe, blowing out a last plume of clinker-like smoke.

'We have never seen eye to eye, but we *are* brothers,' Gargo told him. 'This fatalism is destructive.'

Xathen drew one of his blades and showed it to the light.

'Do you recognise this?'

'Of course.'

'You forged it.'

'I forged many of the Pyre's weapons,' said Gargo.

Xathen shook his head as he examined the stunning blade. 'No,' he said. 'This was before Macragge, before we became bodies for the pyre.'

Unsure where this was going, Gargo let him speak.

'The armour you forged for Numeon was a thing of beauty. Any master artisan would be justly proud. Not you though, Gargo.' He smiled sadly. 'This,' he lifted the blade and turned it around in his grip before sheathing it, 'and that armour… as night and day, brother.' Xathen's melancholy turned to anger. 'Don't tell me you don't want blood for that, for everything you've lost.'

Gargo looked at the armour pieces he had reworked, at the fine engraving and every ounce of craft he had invested in them.

'Yes, I want blood for that,' he said as he threw it all back into the forge fire, determined to begin again.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Dying light

Battle-barge Charybdis*, novatum*

Circe saw only blackness. She was closeted within the narrow confines of her novatum away from the rest of the crew.

Sparsely appointed, the chamber was austere in the extreme. These were not Circe's quarters, though she spent a great deal of time in seclusion within them. The novatum was a bare metal hold, not much more comfortable than a cell. Appended to the bridge, secured in its upper vaults and accessible via a shallow walkway, it was nonetheless segregated and sealed off. It had enough room for a small cot bed. There were no mirrors, no reflective surfaces of any kind. A simple vox-unit linked her to the bridge below her and the lumens worked into the deck at her feet were kept low at all times. It was warm, stifling even, but she knew it would grow colder soon enough.

An arcane circle delineated the area in which the Navigator would do her work. Circe was kneeling inside it, a metaphor for separation. Her gift was isolation. It was fear, segregation and the absolute certainty of never having a chance for a normal life. Her 'warp eye' as it was known, that which could perceive what all other sight could not, made her both incredibly valuable and almost universally loathed by her fellow man.

Aside from a few rudimentary materials, the novatum's only adornment was a tattered paper pict. As Circe closed her natural eyes, she caressed the faded vellum, imagining her fingers touched the face of the little girl captured forever upon it.

A tear ran down her cheek, and she wiped it away with a frail hand.

Circe engaged the vox and heard Lieutenant Esenzi's voice crackle into life at

the other end of the link.

'*Mistress.*'

Circe didn't like that word, although she knew Esenzi meant nothing by it. She nodded.

'I am prepared,' she replied.

'*All hands ready.*'

She nodded again, trying to stifle a slight tremor of unease that had suddenly manifested in her gut. It felt like a spike of ice in the heady atmosphere of the novatum.

'Shipmaster?' she said, needing Adyssian's confirmation though actually wanting to hear his voice.

'*At your will, Circe. Take us into the storm,*' he said, whispering. '*Let the Emperor's grace keep you and stave away harm.*'

'His light guides us…' she whispered back, finishing the quote from the *Lectitio Divinitatus.*

As she reached up to her silver circlet, she trembled.

Circe had to admit it. She was scared.

+Gird yourself, Navigator,+ a deeper, harsher voice intruded. Not through the vox-feed; this one spoke to her mind.

Ushamann.

Despite her unease about him, she was glad of the Librarian's presence.

Circe removed her band, exposing her third eye.

Darkness unfurled before her, an endless night. Silence dulled her senses, both natural and preternatural, but not for long. Something moved in the shadow, a slowly uncurling tendril. It coiled and twisted, writhing as further tendrils unfurled, reaching for the *Charybdis.*

Circe saw into the storm, not its heart but its virgin borders… and quailed.

'There is no light…'

+Hold to your post,+ the stern voice told her.

Like a thunderclap presages the breaching of the heavens and the deluge that follows, the silence broke and in its place came screaming.

Circe gritted her teeth. She tasted blood. Her limbs trembled.

The ship bucked, like a schooner struck by a plunging breaker as the *Charybdis* was tossed around in the storm.

Pressing her feeble hands against her ears, she tried in vain to arrest the screaming.

+Maintain heading,+ said Ushamann, more strained than stern now.

Circe could barely hear it. The screaming drowned out the words.
‘No light…’ she sobbed.
Endless darkness, cold and suffocating, swallowed her.
‘No light…’
She screamed too, her grasp slipping.
+Navigator!+
Ushamann was too late.
Circe fell, and the *Charybdis* fell with her.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Tremors

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo decks*

A tremor rippled down the length of the ship. The lurching deck threw Zytos hard against the wall but he kept his footing. Others, mortals, in the corridor ahead of him fell. Some were injured. He saw a woman badly gash her forehead. She had been ushering a young girl to their quarters when the tremor hit.

She looked like one of the refugees.

'Are you all right?' Zytos asked, helping the woman to her feet.

'Just a cut, I'll be fine,' she replied, frowning. She smiled, grateful. 'Thank you. For saving us. We all thought we'd die in that place. Ever since the war…' There was loss in her eyes; Zytos recognised that selfsame look in his own face. 'None of us have met Space Marines like you before.'

'I'll take that as a compliment.' Zytos knelt down to speak to the girl, who was cowering and hugging the woman's leg. 'And you? Are you injured, child?'

She slowly shook her head, eyes wide with awe and fear at the onyx-skinned warrior. The lights across the corridor flared, flickered and then dulled. Zytos's eyes looked bright as burning coals in the sudden gloom.

'Find some quarters and stay inside, understand?' he told them, rising to his feet. 'No harm will befall you whilst there are sons of Vulkan on this ship, but it's not safe to be wandering around.'

The woman appeared to take heart in that, though the little girl gave a last fearful glance before burying her face in the woman's leg.

'She's your daughter?' asked Zytos.

'No, I don't know her,' replied the woman. 'She latched on to me when we arrived. Didn't seem right to leave her.'

‘I see,’ said Zytos, for want of something better.

‘Brother.’

Var’kir’s voice brought Zytos’s attention to the Chaplain, who now stood in the corridor before him, watching the refugees disappear into their quarters.

‘I have no idea what we are supposed to do with them,’ Var’kir admitted.

‘What happened?’ asked Zytos.

Var’kir suddenly looked grim.

‘We dropped back out of warp.’

‘Already?’

Var’kir nodded.

‘The storm repelled our Navigator.’

‘Wasn’t Ushamann supposed to shore her up and prevent that?’

‘He couldn’t, the tumult was too strong. It–’

Another tremor shook the *Charybdis;* struts groaned and flexed in protest and the heavy boom of psychic aftershocks struck the side of the ship like gargantuan breakers.

Zytos frowned. ‘Is she taking us back in?’

‘I don’t–’

The lights down the corridor flared again, so intense and magnesium-bright that Zytos had to shield his eyes. A loud drone presaged every lumen fizzing out, and the ship was plunged into sudden darkness.

The resonance of engine shutdown carried through the skin of the ship, echoing loudly. The perpetual hum of onboard systems died, replaced by silence. Atmosphere recyclers, illumination, life support, everything failed.

Several seconds passed in tomb-like silence before the dull machine shunt of emergency systems kicked in, washing the corridor in a crimson glow. Air filtration returned but at fractional strength.

Zytos was already on the vox to Zonn.

‘*We briefly lost power, sergeant,*’ came the Techmarine’s reply without need of prompting.

‘It has yet to return in this part of the ship, Techmarine. What happened?’

‘*Damage sustained coming out of warp prematurely. It has knocked some of our essential systems offline. I am working to rectify it.*’

‘What parts of the ship have been affected, brother?’

‘*All of them. We have minimal life support, our engines are at motive power only. All weapon systems, augurs and void shields are also down. Bridge, novatum, sensorium, apothecarion, barracks, interrogation, even the galley are*

all–’

Var’kir interjected.

‘Interrogation?’

‘*Affirmative, Chaplain. All bulkheads and access doors are powered down.*’

‘Damn it.’

Kaspian Hecht had braced his hands across the table, palms down, and was waiting for his gaolers to return when the sense of dislocation struck him.

A mental impulse sent tremors through his psyche strong enough to make him stagger. His hands turned into claws, gripping the table in order to stay upright as he was nearly thrown from his seat.

‘Throne of Terra…’ he muttered, awash with feverish sweat.

His respiratory rate escalated suddenly as a burning itch flared across nerve endings. He clutched at his face, as if trying to keep the flesh from tearing apart and considered the fact he might be under some form of psychic attack.

Lord Malcador had warned of the perils of his mission, of the attention it would draw. Those within the Knights Errant were often alone and with Hecht’s intended partner missing and probably dead, it meant reinforcement was not going to be forthcoming.

Another seizure gripped him, forcing Hecht’s body into spasm and igniting hundreds of tiny misfires across his synapses. His enhanced biology did its best to compensate, flooding his system with chemicals, thundering his secondary heart into action to expedite a palliative reaction.

Hecht slipped and kicked the chair out from under him. He would have fallen had he not seized the edge of the table, gripping it firmly and sending small cracks webbing across its surface.

In the flickering light above hitting the table’s reflective veneer, he caught sight of his face... and recoiled.

Backing away, Hecht reached for a weapon he no longer carried. His fingers trembled as he fought for control.

Then it stopped. And he knew.

Calmly, assertively, he stood up.

As he approached the table again, he still did not recognise the face staring back at him but now he knew why.

His gaze went to the door. A crimson symbol lit up on the locking mechanism indicated his passage was barred.

Then the lights flickered again, before cutting out. So did the crimson symbol.

The low, metallic thunk of deadbolts disengaging followed.

Divine providence?

Hecht thought not as he made for the door.

Zytos swore under his breath. 'Does anything still function, Zonn?'

'*Low-range sensorium and astronavigation. We are outside of the new Imperium, somewhere in the Charadon Sector. I have also detected an inbound vessel.*'

'What?' Zytos felt his blood run cold as he exchanged a worried glance with Var'kir.

'*It is the* Necrotor, *brother-sergeant. Somehow they have found us.*'

'How soon can we get shields and weapon systems up and running again?'

'*Not soon enough. Judging on its approach vector, the* Necrotor *has its engines on full burn.*'

'Is it powering up lances? Any torpedoes in the void?'

Zytos knew the *Charybdis* was a much larger ship than the light cruiser currently bearing down on them. But he also suspected the Death Guard vessel was an outrider for a bigger fleet. Besides, superiority of size and weapons meant nothing if you could not unleash them.

'*Negative. They are closing with us. My tactical analysis is that they mean to board us. I expect the imminent departure of launch boats and docking torpedoes*.'

The same thought had struck Zytos too.

Var'kir was already on the vox, warning of the imminent assault.

'How long?'

Zonn told him.

'Helfyre…' Zytos severed the link.

Var'kir met his gaze.

'What about Hecht? We can't have him running free whilst all this is going on.'

'How many aboard that cruiser, do you think?'

'Could be a hundred legionaries. Maybe more.'

Zytos shook his head ruefully. The *Charybdis* was a massively powerful ship but it was woefully undermanned.

'Muster the Pyre – do it now, brother. I'll find Hecht.'

'And Numeon?'

'He heard the order,' said Zytos. 'He'll either stay where he is or he'll answer the call. Either they know who we carry and are coming here to make sure he's

dead, or they're opportunists looking for a hefty scalp. It doesn't matter either way.'

Var'kir nodded, donning his helmet.

'It will be done.'

As he was about to leave, Zytos gripped his forearm.

'I know this is not your role, Chaplain. I know you aren't my equerry.'

Var'kir clapped Zytos on the shoulder, brother to brother.

'All of us are what we need to be on this journey. Into the fires, brother,' he said.

Zytos let him go.

'Let's hope we don't burn in them.'

Inside the sanctum, the lights flared once and then died.

Numeon was kneeling in silence, and looked up at the sudden interruption. He then stifled an irrational surge of panic when he heard the bio-scanner bleep once then fail too.

It was not life-sustaining, he reminded himself; it monitored only. Still, the psychological blow of seeing it dead and inert rather than registering the faintest spike of biological or neurological activity had Numeon's heart racing for a moment.

He pushed himself up, back onto his feet. His knuckles were raw and bruised. His face the same. It was reflected in the glass of Vulkan's funerary casket.

Drawn, haunted, he looked more of a corpse than his father did. He was also bleeding, his lip split and his right eye swollen. These were wounds earned in shame, not battle.

The sigil was laid in front of him like an offering. Numeon realised there were flecks of blood on the hammer's head. Salamander blood. His, Zytos's… Did it matter?

Numeon tried not to imagine accusation and judgement in Vulkan's face. Had he been awake to bear witness to two of his most trusted sons beating all hell out of one another, his reprimand would have been severe.

Denial, anger… His grief had taken him on a dark journey. He needed to emerge now. He had to take up the mantle, to lead these desperate warriors.

Salamanders did not raise fists or weapons against one another in anger. Vulkan had made them better than that. He had taught them the value of life, and brotherhood. He had spared them from destruction.

'How easy it has become to forget your lessons, father,' Numeon said in a quiet

voice. ‘When you are no longer here to remind us.’ He wiped away the blood from the hammer’s head.

Above, he heard the atmosphere recyclers slowly powering down. In a few more seconds, their drone had faded completely until there was only abject silence and the dull humming activation of the ship’s emergency systems.

Something had happened during warp translation. They were still in real space. Without power, they were also vulnerable.

His place was on the bridge, not here by his father’s side. Not yet. Numeon held the sigil tight and brought it close to his face.

‘I promise you, father,’ he whispered. ‘We will see Nocturne again and revive your body in the earth. But I have abandoned my brothers and must make amends. I see that now. I see the path I must take. But please,’ he said, weeping, ‘give me some small sign. Show me there is life yet in the Lord of Drakes.’

Looking down upon the recumbent form of the primarch, Numeon only saw the quiet sleep of the dead. But despite the many months since his demise, Vulkan had not decayed or putrefied. His flesh remained inured to entropy. Eternal.

It was faint hope but they had left Macragge with little more than that.

Before he left the sanctum, Numeon uttered four solemn words that he hoped would resonate.

‘Unto the anvil, father…’

TWENTY-NINE

Breach

Battle-barge Charybdis*, interrogation chamber*

As he came up on the room where they had left Hecht, Zytos had one hand on his sidearm. He had no reason to believe the grey legionary had malicious intentions but until he knew the agenda and motives of Malcador's supposed agent, he would not trust him.

As suspected, the door was unlocked. It was also open.

Zytos pulled his bolt pistol out of its holster and began to wonder if he should be doing this alone. Setting off a needless panic just as they were about to come under attack was a further complication he could well do without. As was a largely unknown legionary, roaming freely about the ship.

On Macragge it had been easy. Lead the Pyre, watch over Vulkan. But it was without purpose. Numeon had given that purpose back to the Legion, or what dregs of it remained, but had left it up to Zytos to grasp the burning brand.

Pushing his irritation aside, Zytos edged into the interrogation room, staying low and holding his pistol in a two-handed grip. He quickly relaxed. No Hecht.

'Sked-eating, son of a–'

He was about to raise Var'kir over the vox when a voice called out to him.

'Son of Vulkan…'

Zytos turned and saw Hecht standing in the corridor that led to the interrogation room, one opposite to the prow-facing stretch he had just run across.

Instinctively, he raised his pistol.

Hecht's hands went up.

'I am still unarmed,' he said. 'You took my weapons, remember?'

Hecht stood next to a glassy viewport still shrouded after the recent aborted

warp translation. His reflection came back at him in a silvery blur.

'May I lower my hands?' he asked.

Zytos holstered his pistol.

'Why did you leave the room?'

'The door unlocked when the power cut out,' he explained. 'I went to investigate. Did we drop out of warp?'

'You know we did,' said Zytos, scowling.

The Salamander met him halfway down the starboard corridor.

'Why didn't you run?' asked Zytos.

Hecht smiled, nonplussed.

'To where would I run? And to what end? I am where I need to be.'

Zytos had no idea what that meant, and he doubted the enigmatic legionary would tell him either.

'Well, I need you back in that room.'

'No, you don't,' said Hecht, and had Zytos reaching for his sidearm again.

'Are you defying me?'

'We are about to come under attack.'

'How did you–?'

'Your vox is on an open channel, easy enough to listen in to. I wanted to know what you were saying about me. Arm me. Let me help you, as you did on Rampart.'

Zytos was sceptical. 'For someone who craves his freedom, you have an odd way of garnering trust.'

Hecht held up his hands in a gesture of contrition.

'I am not trying to antagonise you. I can, however, help with your current predicament.'

'For your freedom?'

Hecht nodded. 'I can be an ally to you, Salamander.'

Zytos was wracked with indecision. Numeon would have known what to do, but Zytos was alone and had to make this call himself.

'Help us now, and I will revisit the decision to keep you under lock and key.'

Hecht laughed mirthlessly.

'It seems I have little choice.'

'You have none at all.' Zytos handed Hecht his sidearm. 'Betray us and I will kill you myself.'

'Fair enough,' said Hecht, feeling the grip and getting used to the pistol. 'What about my own weapons?'

Zytos pulled out his hammer. ‘No time for that.’ He gestured to the starboard corridor. ‘That way, towards the bridge. You lead.’

‘Are you watching my back or your own?’

‘Once we reach my brothers, I won’t need to do either.’

Hecht laughed again.

‘War has made you all cynical.’

Zytos thought of Isstvan V, and then the corpse lying in the *Charybdis’*s cargo hold.

‘Treachery has made us cynical. I won’t deny it, but we have much reason to be.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Hecht, ‘but I have never seen a more devoted band of brothers.’

‘We have had to be.’

‘You have lost much.’

Zytos muttered darkly as they headed off, ‘We’ll lose more before this is over.’

Flocks of servitors, enginseers and indentured menials scurried through the maintenance decks hefting tools and welding equipment.

They were running.

The last dregs got through the defensive cordon just as the barricades closed.

Far’kor Zonn activated the raft of sentry guns. Hard-mounted multi-lasers and autocannons cycled up into readiness. The ammo gauge of each one flashed up onto the Techmarine’s retinal display as they came online.

As he issued a blurt of binaric cant, thirty-six weaponised servitors manned the first foot of the barricades. Targeters filled the gloomy enginarium with a cross-hatching of grainy, red light. The rest of the defences were manned by human menials armed with carbines and shotguns.

Zonn’s culverin hummed gently in his clenched gauntlet. Though he knew the others could not detect it yet, his augmetic hearing tracked the pitch of the magna-cutters slowly boring through the *Charybdis’*s battered hull. His enhanced auto-senses mapped heat fluctuations, determining the most likely point of ingress. It was here Zonn had placed his defences.

Before he had detected the approach of the *Necrotor,* Zonn had marshalled every available serf trained in the basic rudiments of engineering and capable of using heavy tools in the reparation of the *Charybdis* with the skill of an experienced general.

He had sent those who were Mechanicum trained to the enginarium to assist with bringing the ship’s main power back online, while the rest were dispatched

in labour gangs to areas of reported structural damage.

Zonn's diagnostic of the *Charybdis* had revealed minor breaches in the vessel's inner skin but nothing to trouble its void-integrity. However, even an insignificant fissure could develop into something more serious if neglected, and there was also the ship's age to consider. On Isstvan V it had taken a fierce pounding from the renegades' surface-to-orbit guns. Patched-up wounds, Zonn knew, had a tendency to reopen if not re-stapled and re-sutured from time to time.

It was a fact that extended to the Legion too.

The Salamanders had suffered, more than most, though perhaps not as much as some. Certainly, were Zonn to perform a statistical analysis based on extrapolated facts he had gleaned from surviving the massacre and the subsequent aftermath, he would determine that the XVIII were much reduced in military efficacy. Scattered as they currently were, it amounted to close to zero effectiveness in the context of the broader war.

Zonn knew they were a Legion on the brink of dissolution. They needed their primarch to restore them, and if Vulkan could not then another must come forward to unify the scattered tribes. As it was in the days before, so it must be again. Hope was all they had left to them.

None of this would mean anything if that hope died along with the *Charybdis*.

Behind the barricade, the workers still toiled. Zonn's thin grey line of automated guns and pallid-skinned servitors were their only defence against what was cutting through the *Charybdis'*s armour.

Farther down the wide corridor across which Zonn had set up his cordon, a small spot of metal in the ship's inner hull flared red. It grew larger in seconds, expanding into a circle of throbbing heat and thermally tortured metal. As the twin hull booms of the docking ram burst through into the enginarium, the defensive line opened fire.

Solid shot and las-beams hammered the assault boat as its ramps opened up and armour-clad legionaries poured out. Dirty white accented with green, the Death Guard had come to the *Charybdis*.

Several of the legionaries fell as they disembarked, quickly lost under the fusillade streaming off the defensive cordon, while the rest managed to advance and secure cover in the alcoves and protruding inner bulwarks of the ship.

Two more docking rams penetrated the hull moments later and the concentrated fire from the defenders was abruptly divided.

Zonn climbed to the highest rampart of the barricade to discharge his culverin.

Volkite beams streaked through darkness lit up by the passage of tracer fire and energy flare.

Dug in, the Death Guard replied with a coordinated storm of bolter fire. Across the line, servitors were torn to pieces as the mass-reactive shells shredded their flesh and machine bodies.

His aiming reticule a mass of potential targets, Zonn locked on to a legionary hefting a belt chain of explosives. Four more legionaries with breacher shields advanced in front, taking the bulk of the punitive fire levelled against them.

Two sentry guns, alerted by the presence of the incendiaries, switched targets. A graviton burst took out one, crushing the autocannon and causing a spectacular misfire that rained shrapnel on the hapless defenders. Six menials died and two combat servitors were ripped to pieces. Injuries went on uncounted.

The second sentry released a short salvo before a lascutter cleaved it in half at close range.

Heedless of all this, Zonn speared the demolitions-carrier through his respirator housing and the breacher shields split apart, blown out from the resulting explosion behind them.

Heavy plasma and lascannon fire cut them down before they could redress ranks.

It was a minor victory amidst a sea of defeat.

Dense smoke clouds roamed ahead of the Death Guard as they released foetid chemical reagents into the atmosphere that swept across the barricades.

Flesh bubbled and sloughed to degraded matter as servitors fell apart still firing. Unprotected menials died horribly, their screams echoing in the vast enginarium space. Zonn's battleplate was hermetically sealed but it still registered the toxicity of the cloud, which sent its hazard gauge red-lining.

His forces were at less than sixty-two per cent. Since the opening seconds of the assault, the casualty rate amongst the Death Guard had been dramatically reduced. Several legionaries were advancing steadily now, shields locked and weathering the slowly diminishing fusillade from the Techmarine's defensive line.

Zonn gave the order to fall back. It was no longer possible to hold the barricade effectively. The defenders had retreated as far as the next bulwark when the barricade they had been manning ruptured in three places, violently split apart by heavy charges.

More virulent smoke issued through the gaps, followed by more legionaries with breacher shields. Bolters locked into the crooks of their shields roared, their

muzzles flaring.

Taking a glancing hit to the shoulder, Zonn sent servitors forwards armed with flamer units and the corridor turned into an inferno. They lasted seconds, as the Death Guard rushed the servitor rearguard and scythed them down.

The rest of Zonn's defenders were almost fifty metres back. A symbol flashed up on his retinal display. Proximity sensor. Zonn armed it with a subvocal command. A vaulted archway separated the section of the enginarium where the Death Guard were massed and that where the thin line of servitors and menials had hunkered down for a last stand.

As the legionary vanguard was about to advance to glory, one of them noticed the red diodes pulsing around the archway supports. A bellowed half-warning in his native Barbaran presaged the detonation of fifteen proximity mines Zonn had rigged around the arch.

The explosion was deafening. The vanguard disappeared amidst fire and smoke as gantries, pipework and much of the upper deck collapsed down on top of them.

Zonn stood furthest forward of the defenders and allowed the surging dust and debris plume to envelop him. Some of the closer menials covered their heads, cowering against the explosion. It was all over in less than a minute, and by that time the corridor was sealed off by an immense wall of wreckage.

Zonn had no way of knowing how many Death Guard had died in the blast. He had waited until they were almost through to throw the charge, so he estimated the number would be significant. It meant their efforts at cutting through the debris would be dramatically reduced, thus garnering enough time to effect repairs to the *Charybdis'*s systems.

'Enginarium is secure, brother-sergeant,' he voxed. 'Proceeding to restore power to the ship.'

THIRTY

Reparation

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo decks*

Numeon felt the vibration through the deck beneath his feet.

An explosion.

During his vigil with the primarch, he had turned off his vox. Now he re-engaged it again and picked up the urgent chatter from across the ship.

A breach.

Death Guard were aboard the *Charybdis*.

He was about to reach out to Zytos when he heard the echo of booted feet coming from the corridor section ahead. He was still in the cargo decks, not far from the sanctum. A labyrinth, it was easy enough to get lost in the myriad tunnels if you didn't have your bearings.

Crouching down into cover, Numeon listened and heard voices. The accent was thick and grating. He didn't recognise the words, but he knew the cadence.

Barbaran.

Numeon waited until he could see them.

Five legionaries, lightly armed and armoured. Snub-nosed shotguns and bolters. Short, thick stabbing blades sheathed at their hips. Reconnaissance squad.

They moved slowly and warily, but out of a practised drill mentality and not because they were expecting trouble. This was a quiet infiltration, a dagger thrust whilst the hammer blow fell elsewhere.

The Death Guard were not here to destroy the ship. The other attacks aboard the *Charybdis* were a feint. They had come for Vulkan.

Numeon drew *Draukoros* from its scabbard as quietly as he could. In the other hand, he had the sigil. Watching them from the shadows, he saw the last member

of the reconnaissance squad pass by a junction before they disappeared down another corridor.

Definitely searching.

Slipping from cover, his blade low and close to his side, Numeon stalked after them. He was nearing the junction where he had lost sight of the squad when he heard a guttural retort in Barbaran.

One of the legionaries was coming back; Numeon was almost on top of him.

Too late to turn back, he took the only course of action he had left.

As the legionary came around the corner, Numeon rammed the sigil, hammerhead first, into his neck. His trachea instantly crushed, the Death Guard choked before gargling up his own blood as *Draukoros* punched into his chest and out through his back.

As Numeon glared into the pallid face of the legionary, he saw slow realisation in the dark eyes and gaunt expression. There was something sickly about these wretches. He had seen it on Rampart, behind the dirty faceplates of the Destroyers, and now he saw it again in these warriors.

'Surprise,' he whispered, leaving the legionary impaled so he could draw his bolt pistol.

It took a few seconds for the rest of the squad to realise what had happened. By then, both sides were firing. Numeon unleashed a burst with *Basilysk* and saw another Death Guard go down clutching a shattered knee. The other three shot up their comrade, who was being used as a meat shield.

Dropping the body, Numeon was forced back around the corner by the sheer weight of fire. Hard shotgun booms shook the corridor, punctuated by the staccato three-round bursts of a boltgun.

After a few more seconds the barrage ceased, and Numeon was left with the ringing echo of weapon discharge. Smoke and the reek of cordite filled the oxygen-starved atmosphere.

One of the Death Guard spat a curse in Barbaran. Then he reverted to Gothic.

'Outgunned, drake,' he said, his voice deep and rasping. 'Give up, and I murder you quick.'

Numeon detected another sound beneath the threats. He rolled back and threw himself away from the junction as the grenade went off. But it wasn't an explosive, not the killing kind anyway.

Dense, flickering smoke spilled out from the grenade's impact point in a rapidly expanding cloud. His helmet lenses instantly crazed with static. All auto-senses immediately failed.

Just able to hear the booted feet rushing down on him, Numeon wrenched off his helmet and ducked into cover as a storm of solid shot and bolter shells filled the corridor.

The vox was dead. Even without his helmet he could still have reached Zytos or one of the Pyre, but the shroud bomb had occluded all comms.

Packing crates made for a solid enough barrier but they were taking hits. The Death Guard fired and then advanced, moving slowly and methodically as they closed on their prey.

Numeon waited. He let the suppressing bursts diminish. He kept waiting, leaving it until he knew his enemy might have started to think they had clipped him and he was incapacitated or even dead… Then he fired, one arm slung around the side of the crate, *Basilysk* on full auto. It was a blind fire to keep the target small, and a calculated risk. It practically drained the clip dry but spewed out muzzle flare and explosive shells in a torrent. He heard a grunt, followed by a chestplate blowing out. It clattered loudly as it hit the deck. In his peripheral vision, he caught the splash of blood hosing the wall. A heavy thud followed. A body.

'Two left,' he muttered, and slipped back farther into the cargo deck.

They were coming. Echoing curses followed him as he moved quickly down a long, crowded corridor.

Hard bangs from a bolter chased him, and he turned mid-flight to fire off a couple of dissuading shots. *Basilysk* clicked empty. His last rounds.

No blade, no pistol. Numeon had the sigil and that was it. Ostensibly a relic, it was still a hammer. On a pragmatic level, he could kill with it.

He made it around the next corner; the gunfire at his back had reduced from burst to single-shot. Conserving ammunition or not intended to kill?

A cold thought slipped into Numeon's gut as he realised he was being herded.

The last two legionaries had split up. They had mapped the cargo hold and were moving to outflank him. Numeon heard the second one getting close, coming up on his blindside and trying to move quietly.

Numeon sprang from his hiding place and hurtled across the next junction, knowing he would present a target to the second legionary but hoping he was fast and sudden enough to spoil the Death Guard's aim.

A shotgun blast rang through his eardrums and he felt the bite of shell fragments in his left shoulder. It hit hard, and he staggered, but reached the next corridor section without serious injury.

All thoughts of stealth abandoned, Numeon ran. He bolted past an expansive

chamber, a small storage bay in the hold, and headed for the sanctum. Vulkan had been interred with his weapons. Forged for the hand of the primarch, his sidearm could be wielded by a legionary two-handed. It was better than nothing.

Numeon raised the vox, but found the return to be patchy.

'This is Numeon,' he said anyway. 'The attack is a feint. They have come for the primarch. They're here for Vulkan.'

He cut the feed, needing to concentrate, trying to hear his enemies.

Then he slowed, wondering how a five-man reconnaissance squad was planning on executing a primarch. They had no knowledge of Vulkan's condition one way or another, or even if he was guarded.

The sanctum was ahead, but the two chasing legionaries had stopped. Numeon could no longer hear them coming after him. He waited, crouched down in the shadows. Nothing. No muffled voices, no more curses. Either it was a trap or they had simply stopped moving for some reason.

Inaction was as likely to get him killed as action. The door to the sanctum remained inviolate. He decided to risk it.

Tracking back the way he had just come, Numeon reached the threshold to the storage bay. What he saw standing in the middle of it turned his fiery blood cold.

A teleportation homer.

The sudden flash of light was blinding, forcing Numeon to turn away. Actinic energies arced and spat across the chamber, crawling up the walls and scorching the deck beneath.

Wreathed in corposant and standing in the middle of the room as the teleportation flare faded was a hulking figure clad in Cataphractii Terminator armour. With dirty white-and-green armour plate swathed with chainmail skirting, a pitted and begrimed warrior stared murderously at Numeon through slatted eye lenses. His high gorget obscured the lower half of his helm and there were alchemical pipes jutting from his armoured back like spines.

Even on Isstvan V, fighting against the notorious Deathshroud, Numeon had never seen its like.

He was a monster.

And he had come aboard the *Charybdis* to make sure Vulkan was dead.

The Terminator lumbered into a sudden charge, his sheer strength and the power of his armour overcoming inertia. Twin lightning claws crackled ominously as he fed energy to the blades.

He uttered no words – just an awful guttural dirge, emitted from his helmet vocaliser. His footfalls were like a mortar barrage, clanging against the deck.

Numeon fell back. He had lost sight of the other two legionaries, but could not worry about that now. As he ran, back to the sanctum, holding out some insane hope that Vulkan might awaken when threatened, or that at least the primarch's weapons would give him a fighting chance, Numeon cursed.

How arrogant they had been. How foolish to think they could leave the protection of Macragge and sail the Ruinstorm like it was nothing. Their enemies had known what they carried before they had even left Port Hera and now it would take something miraculous to hold on to it.

He reached the sanctum and was about to open it when he turned instead.

The Terminator was still coming. He had lost some ground, but the Death Guard's momentum was impossible to stop. Light from the deck above streamed down in murky, grey shafts. It picked out kill-markings, scores and wounds, the legacy of war this immense slab of armoured plate had endured.

Numeon swung the sigil around into a two-handed grip. The haft was short, and his hands touched but he held it firmly. It was a symbol, a piece of the primarch's old armour that had become a relic. How could he hope to stop this monster with a sigil?

Numeon could not have known the poignancy of what he said next.

'It's also a hammer…'

The monstrous bellow through the Terminator's vox-grille obliterated thought, as loud as a grenade blast and magnified by the close, inescapable confines of the hold.

Like some mythic hero of old Nocturne facing down a drake of the deep, Numeon did not falter. He raised his chin, took firm grip and readied to swing…

Numeon roared, for to do anything else would mean facing the inevitability of his own death without the slightest measure of defiance. And he wanted to be defiant in the face of this thing.

'Vulkan!'

He swung, timing the blow precisely so it would reach the apex of its strength and be met by the momentum of the Terminator at the exact same moment.

What happened next did so in a blur of motion and reaction.

A shell burst struck the Death Guard in the side and tore off a chunk of ablative armour, making him stumble. He raised his head, looking towards the threat but preparing to grind his enemy into a pulped mass, when a second shot clipped a knee joint and took out a servo.

Suddenly unsure of his footing, the Terminator sagged to the left and his shoulder guard ripped a gouge into the wall as he careened off it.

The hammer struck the solar plexus, first denting the chestplate and then caving it in. Ceramite cracked and split, and adamantium sheared off like shed skin, thrown by the concussive impact of the hammer.

Mesh, skin, bone, organs all capitulated as the Cataphractii-armoured legionary stopped dead, a pulse of abruptly arrested momentum radiating from the point where Numeon had struck him. The glass in a nearby temperature gauge shattered, pipes groaned as they bent, the deck beneath crumpled and contracted as it was crushed.

Then it was over.

Numeon remained standing, the hammer outstretched, his mind still processing what had just happened.

A heavily armoured legionary lay dead in front of him, Cataphractii war-plate sundered, a grim cavity yawning dark red where the chest should have been.

No blood stained the hammer. It remained, as it ever was, a symbol of Vulkan.

That symbol, along with its wielder, took on fresh meaning for Zytos as he came forwards in a daze.

His stunned gaze went from Numeon to the sigil and back again, before he sank to his knees.

Zytos whispered the words for he had not voice enough for anything stronger.

'Vulkan lives…'

Numeon nodded, and for the first time felt his brother's belief. It had become the mirror of his own.

'He will,' he promised. 'On Nocturne, the Lord of Drakes will rise from the ashes and our Legion shall be–'

Numeon's eyes widened as he reached for *Basilysk,* knowing it was already empty.

Kaspian Hecht came out of the shadows and fired off two quick shots.

Too late to react, Numeon felt both shells narrowly miss his skull. They found their mark behind him, where the two remaining legionaries from the reconnaissance squad lay dead.

One shot in the neck, the other the heart. Death was almost instantaneous.

Zytos turned, back on his feet, and saw his outstretched pistol in the grey legionary's hand.

'The other one, with the shattered knee, I finished at close range,' said Hecht, holding out the pistol muzzle-first for a few seconds, before turning it around and offering up the handle grip. 'Your weapon, Salamander,' he added calmly.

Zytos took it but then turned back to Numeon.

‘How, brother? How?’
Numeon’s answer was profound.
‘Vulkan.’

THIRTY-ONE

Catharsis

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

Adyssian sat in agitated silence, gripping the arms of his throne. He could barely see his crew, though he knew they stood diligently at their stations, waiting for the light to return. They had been reduced to emergency lumens only. A blood-red gloom pervaded. It edged the armour of the legionaries guarding the door to his bridge, turning their battleplate a monochrome crimson.

Their weapons were aimed at the door, their formation unmoved since they had first adopted it. They too waited. They did not speak, they did not adjust position. Adyssian wasn't even sure if they breathed.

Everyone held their breath.

The *Charybdis* had been breached, the enginarium attacked. Far'kor Zonn's last transmission had been to declare his section secure and his intention to restore power.

As the shipmaster of a Space Marine battle-barge, Adyssian carried a great deal of power. He could sunder planets if he chose, or was so ordered. At that precise moment, he felt as impotent as a child.

Lights flared, and systems that had been inert for the last few minutes came back online. A hololith crackled into life on a second dais before Adyssian's throne, suspended above the deck. It depicted the vessel that had assaulted them. It had begun to disengage. A parting barrage from its laser batteries did little more than strip some armour off the *Charybdis'*s gnarled flank. She was a monster of a ship. It would take more than a scratch to worry her. The starboard shield array went up and the barrage from the retreating *Necrotor* ceased as the Death Guard realised the folly in it. They would be siphoning every iota of

power into the engines, trying to escape.

It was futile, and Adyssian knew it. They had found a wounded beast out in the wild and tried to kill it. But the beast had woken and now it had them.

Adyssian felt the belligerent machine-spirit of the *Charybdis* as he leaned forwards in his throne, a master of the universe again. It bayed for retribution, a great saurian roar that sent Adyssian's heart pounding as surely as if he had really heard it echoing throughout the ship. With no small measure of satisfaction, he gave the order.

'Right flank broadsides…' he grinned like a feral hunter whose elusive prey is in his sights at last, '…*fire.*'

A shiver ran down the spine of the ship, felt all the way to the dais on the bridge where Adyssian sat upon his throne. From below decks, there came the peal of distant thunder.

Described on the hololith, the vessel known as the *Necrotor* vanished behind a silent flare of detonating void shields. Overwhelmed, overloaded, its scant protection was stripped away in seconds before barely a quarter of the *Charybdis'*s bombardment cannons had hit their mark. Ablative armour surrendered without resistance and the *Necrotor'*s immense cruiser-feeding fuel cells cooked off, igniting a chain reaction that first tore the ship in half along its dorsal aspect and then destroyed it utterly.

Chunks of debris exploded as far as the *Charybdis,* but the battle-barge's shields absorbed their impact.

A single, punitive salvo. It was over in seconds.

Adyssian leaned back, grimly satisfied.

'We are the killer of worlds,' he murmured, quoting an old naval saying. 'We are the sailors of the untamed sea.'

THIRTY-TWO

Tempered

Battle-barge Charybdis*, the Igneum*

In the Igneum, a gathering had taken place.

Not since the Ash Quarter on Macragge had the Pyre come together in this way. Sixty-six brothers faced one another around a large, circular table. As far as they knew, here were the last of the Salamanders. Here, the fate of the primarch and the Legion rested.

Reminders of its legacy were hanging from the great hall's vaults or standing in sunken alcoves behind shimmering, near-imperceptible integrity fields.

From the glory of Antaem to the ignominy of Isstvan, there were banners and standards from every major conflict. For as well as a great ocean predator of the void, the *Charybdis* had become a relic ship. Much had been lost during the massacre, entire tribes of Nocturne destroyed that might never be seen again, but the Igneum had retained and safeguarded a small measure of these remembrances.

It seemed both an odd, yet wholly apt, setting for the conclave. It was entirely possible these would be the last histories of the Salamanders and that the sixty-six warriors aboard the *Charybdis* would be the only ones to see it.

They had to hope that was not the case, that more had survived the storm. Perhaps at Geryon Deep or one of the other outposts. If Nocturne still endured then there might yet be recruits to take up the flaming brand of the fallen. With a primarch… Many had begun to dare to believe. Numeon had instilled in Vulkan's sons something they had been lacking ever since the bombs had fallen on the dirty soil of their greatest defeat.

Hope.

But it was survival that dominated their words in the vast, echoing hall.

'No, brother,' said Numeon. 'They know we are here and whom we carry. This is just the beginning.'

Xathen frowned. 'I thought we destroyed the *Necrotor,* or did I imagine its iron bones littering the void in our wake, much like I had to imagine the battle?'

'A vanguard vessel only, brother,' said Zytos. 'A fleet will most assuredly follow.'

Xathen muttered bitterly, still sour at having been denied combat with the Death Guard, but found it hard to disagree.

Since the attack, not every one of the *Charybdis'*s systems had been functioning. They had limited void shields, basic life support and broadsides were back online. As soon as the plasma engines had been restored, the ship had got under way. Progress was slow through the void, but Zonn had yet to finish repairs. Of the entire Legion aboard the *Charybdis,* only the Techmarine was absent from the conclave. As soon as he had the warp drives functional again, another attempt could be made to breach the turbulent veil of the Ruinstorm, but not before Ushamann had prepared Circe more thoroughly.

'I have seen the Death Guard's presence in the flames,' said Var'kir.

'Hunters follow our spoor,' said Ushamann, all but confirming it. 'An immense ship… Ponderous, slow but unstoppable.'

'Then what is to be done?' asked Gargo. 'They come for Vulkan, we know that much now.'

All eyes went to Numeon, who had gained an even greater aura of awe and respect since word of what transpired in the cargo decks had travelled.

Numeon nodded. 'Even if they do not believe, as we do, that our father lives, his scalp would be a difficult prize to resist.'

Zytos noted that Var'kir's gaze fell incrementally at the assertion that Vulkan was somehow alive in his deathly state, but he chose not to question it. For now, all that mattered was that Numeon was amongst them again.

'The *Charybdis* is a strong ship, and Adyssian a capable master of her, but she is old and no match for a fleet,' Gargo replied. 'That said, the Death Guard are tenacious. They won't give up now they have our scent.'

'Let us hope,' murmured Xathen, though most around the conclave ignored his misplaced belligerence.

Zytos shut him down. 'A reckoning with them is not to our advantage, regardless of our *shared* desire for revenge. If this behemoth that stalks us is as large a ship as Ushamann has intimated then we should try to avoid battle.'

‘Agreed,’ said Var’kir, and many nodded at the Chaplain’s accession. No Salamander would shirk combat if he was called upon, but they had long since given up their almost suicidal tendencies.

‘If we can’t fight then we must outrun them and hope our fortunes amidst the storm improve,’ said Numeon.

‘You want us to run all the way to Nocturne?’ asked Zytos.

Numeon smiled, but without warmth. ‘I would have us crawl on our bellies if it meant we reached home. It offends every instinct I possess, but, yes, we have to flee from Mortarion’s dogs. And rest assured, they *are* dogs. Dregs left behind, in search of petty glory. Ours is a higher cause, forged by brotherhood.’

‘Speaking of which,’ Var’kir began. ‘The matter of the grey legionary.’

‘Kaspian Hecht,’ Zytos confirmed. ‘I say he is one of us.’

‘He can never be one of us, brother,’ said Xathen, and many amongst the conclave agreed. ‘We know nothing of this legionary, save his claim that he serves the Sigillite, the only proof of which is the mark upon his armour.’

‘I saw him fight beside us, with us too, Xathen,’ Zytos reminded him.

‘He fought to save his own skin,’ said Var’kir, earning a scathing glance from the sergeant.

‘Against known traitors trying to kill him and us. I would say that makes us allies, wouldn’t you?’

‘I have fought beside allies before,’ said Xathen, making it clear that he and the Chaplain were the two chief points of opposition he needed to overcome.

‘This is different.’

‘Is this wise, Zytos?’ Var’kir asked. ‘Already, we are pursued by enemies who somehow know who we are and the nature of our precious cargo.’

Loud murmurings of agreement filled the hall.

‘No,’ Zytos replied, having to raise his voice. ‘But I gave up on wise decisions the moment we chose this course.’

Numeon held up his hand, gesturing for silence.

‘I realise we have many enemies, but I do not think Hecht is one of them. He is enigmatic, that is true, but I believe we were meant to find him. The grey legionary is as much a part of this mission as any of us, now.’

‘*Meant* to find him?’ Xathen muttered to Ushamann, who had remained largely silent throughout the conclave until now.

‘Before this conclave gathered, I spoke to this Hecht,’ he said aloud. ‘On Rampart, I felt the relief of the survivors at his presence. It was overwhelming. He claims there is a path through the Ruinstorm.’

A tremor of surprise and guarded excitement rippled through the Salamanders at this news.

'What path?' asked Numeon, his focus solely on Ushamann.

'One of our own making.'

Numeon scowled, unable to hide his irritation. 'No more riddles, Librarian. How do we navigate the storm?'

Ushamann bowed his head, revealing the drake sigils shaved into his skull in the flickering brazier light.

'No riddle,' he replied. 'A single ship, buoyed by hope. It is the smallest pinprick of light that can pierce the darkness where a shaft would not. Our own path. I took the notion from his very thoughts, brother.'

Xathen remained sceptical. 'What does that even mean?'

Numeon, who up until now had been so convinced of their path and purpose, had no answer.

'Perhaps that our fate is still our own,' offered Gargo, no less cryptically than the Librarian.

'And what else did you glean, Ushamann?' asked Var'kir. 'What about Hecht's purpose here?'

Ushamann met the Chaplain's gaze.

'Nothing else.'

'He hid his thoughts from you?'

Ushamann nodded. 'Not intentionally. His mind has been shielded. The barriers are impenetrable to me. I know of few psykers who could unlock them. I doubt even Lord Umojen could do it.'

A few of the conclave muttered oaths of honour and remembrance at the mention of the Chief Librarian's name. None present knew his fate. He had been on Terra during the Isstvan V massacre, but if Guilliman's assumptions were correct then Umojen was already ashes, along with the Throneworld.

'If the wards are not Malcador's, then they are potent enough to pass for such,' Ushamann concluded.

Zytos regarded him in silence for a few seconds. He spoke to the room.

'We have to trust *someone,* brothers.' Zytos then glanced at Var'kir. 'You have said as much before, brother.'

A pensive silence fell, encompassing the conclave.

Trust was not a ready concept to a Salamander these days.

Numeon broke the silence. 'Hecht is with us, like it or not.'

'Is that an order, Numeon?' asked the Chaplain.

‘It is.’

‘Are you captain of this Pyre then, brother?’ asked Gargo, and all eyes turned to the legionary who was once Vulkan’s equerry.

Numeon did not shirk from them. If anything, he stood taller.

‘Until the Lord of Drakes returns, I am your master.’

Xathen got to his feet and drew his kaskara blade.

Then they all did, even Zytos, whose wounded pride was salved by the return of his captain.

‘All hail Numeon!’ cried Xathen, his sword upraised.

Sixty-five blades and hammers, unique, deadly and supremely crafted shone in the fiery glow of torches as they rose up in salute.

‘Vulkan lives!’ shouted Xathen, before sixty-six voices rang out in unison.

‘Vulkan lives!’

At last, thought Zytos, as the echoes of affirmation died down, *we have some hope…*

THIRTY-THREE

Blight

Grand cruiser Reaper's Shroud*, bridge*

A corpse, its spine broken, its ribs spread and its guts left drooling into the void, drifted past the *Reaper's Shroud.* The immense Vengeance-class warship dwarfed the broken *Necrotor,* and its shadow entirely engulfed what was left of the light cruiser.

'All hands?' asked a wet, rasping voice.

The reply was curt with barely suppressed anger. 'No survivors.'

Malig Laestygon drew in a shuddering, bloody gargle of breath.

Through the hololith, he saw a grainy grey render of the dead vessel.

'Closer.'

A brief flicker of static and the image zoomed in, revealing more detail. Chunks of armour plating, fragments of the ship's exoskeleton, entire decks ripped out and exposed to the vacuum all floated without anchor, all blackened by flame.

'Closer.'

Munitions crates, blast doors wrenched from their housings, bodies…

'Closer.'

Sundered battleplate, split and broken war-helms, a fractured eye lens. Faces etched in anguish and rage, limbs drifting free of torsos, bloodshot eyes, frost-rimed skin.

Death.

Tens of thousands claimed by the void, surrendered to the great cull.

'Lord Laestygon…'

A ripe harvest, a grim reaping of skulls…

'Commander!'

Laestygon heard, though he kept his gaze on the macabre vista he had created on the bridge of the *Reaper's Shroud.*

'It was a large ship…' he said, '…that burned right through the *Necrotor.*'

'The density of its plasma wake suggests a cruiser or battle-barge,' offered the shipmaster. 'It would seem… they attacked it.'

'Greedy little curs.' Laestygon gave a phlegmy, cancerous laugh. 'She was stricken and they tried to board her. And then she wasn't.'

In his mind's eye, Laestygon imagined the desperate, eager boarding action that must have taken place. Then he saw the larger vessel's weapon banks return to potency and the ensuing destruction that came with it.

'So, Huruk wasn't lying then…'

The last report from the *Necrotor* had come from within the enemy ship. Claims had been made, outlandish in nature. They were the selfsame promises spoken by the Preacher during their last communication.

A primarch, he claimed. An unkillable primarch, vulnerable, lying in state and aboard this vessel. Its purpose, unknown. Its cargo, almost beyond comprehension.

Alliances were not to Laestygon's tastes. He was a purist, and everything that that implied, but the Preacher had proven useful. He might even prove vital, should the rumours that had come from the *Necrotor* be verified.

'A sanctuary, was it?'

'Yes, lord,' answered the shipmaster.

Laestygon had yet to deign to look at the mortal when he addressed him.

'Huruk's vainglory has cost us a ship, but it might yet yield something more valuable,' Laestygon considered aloud. Huruk had been the highest-ranking officer aboard the *Necrotor,* and was the leader of a large warband that Laestygon had picked up from the killing fields of Isstvan V. Most were dogs that had been left behind, but Huruk had shown some promise.

A pity he was dead.

Fortunate he did not expire in vain.

Laestygon smiled, turning his gaze from the hololith for the first time in a while.

'Summon the Preacher.'

The shipmaster gave a curt bow, and was about to instruct one of his crew when Laestygon interrupted.

'And speak my rank to me in that manner again, Rack, and I shall force-feed you my blade.'

The shipmaster paled, and his hands began to tremble before he got them under control.

'Yes, my lord. It won't happen again.'

Laestygon turned away, a wet sigh escaping his rad-burnt lips.

'Yes.'

Ever since birth, pain had been a constant companion to Malig Laestygon.

As an infant, he contracted a wasting pox and would have succumbed had his endurance and desire to live not sustained him. As a neophyte, he had lost several fingers during an exercise and very nearly his arm, but had overcome this minor setback. In the armies of Mortarion, he had suffered. Against the hordes of Galaspar, an incendiary had taken out a chunk of his abdomen, nearly severing his left leg, yet he had limped away from that battle. On the killing fields on Isstvan V, a volkite had cooked off half of his face and left a melted wax ruin of flesh behind. Radiation burns, phosphex, crippling void exposure, Laestygon had weathered it all. And lived.

If anyone was unkillable, it was he.

Despite many injuries, Malig Laestygon had refused augmetics, trusting in his Barbaran constitution to keep him breathing. He did so now in a wheezing rasp, having badly burned his larynx by unintentionally inhaling promethium vapour during the sanitisation on Isstvan III.

Every battle, another scar. He knew it was this way for most warriors. His star had never been ascendant. Climbing the ranks through stolid soldiering and by assuming the mantles of dead men, Laestygon attributed all of his modest success to one thing.

He was a survivor.

But here, now, he had a chance to be something greater. To be remembered.

I shall be the first legionary to kill a primarch.

Ever since Fulgrim beheaded Ferrus Manus, it had seemed possible to slay one of the Emperor's sons. Prior to that pivotal moment on Isstvan, it would have been easy to think of the primarchs as immortal. After Fulgrim had taken the Gorgon's head, the butchery did not end. Like jackals, the maddened warriors of Horus's rebellion fell upon Ferrus Manus. Some tried to take trophies, others hacked at his body out of some strange primal instinct, as close to fear as a legionary might ever get. It was Fulgrim who landed the killing blow, though.

Rumour had it that Horus himself now possessed the skull of Ferrus Manus, and that he praised the Phoenician as the righteous slayer of a primarch.

Here was Laestygon's opportunity to claim such a singular accolade for

himself.

He had quickly warmed to the notion. Now it was almost within reach, he practically salivated. Even if Vulkan was really a corpse, he would simply take his head and claim the deed had been done to a living, breathing scion of the Emperor.

Far from proud, Laestygon merely wanted a little glory with which to anoint his banner instead of just the agglomerated filth of war.

His dirty white-and-green armour, adorned with patched-up blade gouges, blackened by las-fire, dented by bolter shells, was hardly the raiment of the glorious.

I am a warhorse, he thought, sitting on his throne above Rack and the rest of the ship's crew. His battered helm with the partially wrenched mouth-grille sat by Laestygon's side, watching the mortals busy themselves with their petty labours. As commander, Laestygon was entitled to a crest but eschewed his officer's crown, deeming it unnecessary and likely to be shot off by his enemies at the first opportunity. He did wear a cloak, but it was ragged and brown with the ingrained dirt of more than a hundred battlefields.

His kukra blade was chipped, but he kept the edge sharp. A double-barrelled bolt pistol sat in a rough-looking holster but it had never jammed, and despite its worn appearance was well maintained.

I am nothing striving to become something.

The architect of that goal had just materialised within the ship's hololithic array.

Quor Gallek flickered in and out of phase, until the ship's augur master adjusted the gain and the robed Word Bearer came starkly into view.

'Preacher, are you ever clad in war-plate, or do you prefer the softness of your priestly vestments?'

Laestygon made no attempt to mask his scorn.

Quor Gallek made no attempt to answer it.

'*They will try again,*' he uttered, voice slightly garbled through the link. '*It is their only choice, to brave the Ruinstorm and take Vulkan into the warp.*'

'You told me the turmoil you stirred up would scupper their ship and send it broken into my reach. But here we are presiding over a wreck of one of my own vessels instead.'

Quor Gallek did his best to hide his irritation at being spoken to like he was another of Laestygon's underlings.

'*It should have done, but I underestimated their resilience.*'

'And now?'

‘*I allow them deeper into the storm, so deep that when the Neverborn lay waste to their ship, they will be cut adrift.*’

Laestygon relaxed in the command throne. His gauntleted fingers clawed the surface of his war-helm, adding to the many scars in the metal.

‘You zealots place too much stock in these daemons. How sure are you they are slaves to your will?’

‘*Pacts have been made. Unbreakable pacts.*’

‘I warrant the Ravens and the Drakes and the Iron Tenth claimed something similar as the first bombs rained down, before the knives slid into their backs. Pacts are always breakable. But you and I have an understanding, preacher.’ Laestygon smiled without an iota of sincerity. ‘I *trust* you. Which is why you must see it done yourself.’

Quor Gallek suddenly faltered, Laestygon’s words having put him on the back foot. He recovered quickly, a genuine expression of satisfaction creeping over his face.

‘*It shall be done.*’

‘And the storm, when we come upon it – we have nothing to concern us there, do we, preacher?’ Laestygon leaned towards the hololithic version of Quor Gallek, as if trying to intimidate him into being truthful.

‘*I can guide us.*’

‘And the primarch, if indeed he is aboard–’

‘*He is.*’

‘*If* he is,’ Laestygon resumed, ‘his head is mine.’

‘*I have no use for a corpse, cousin. I merely want the shaft of stone that will be jutting from his cold body.*’

Laestygon smiled. He had heard the spearhead referenced more than once. Quor Gallek had called it a fulgurite, a lightning stone. Whatever power it harboured had been enough to kill Vulkan if the Word Bearer’s claims were to be believed. Laestygon had considered betraying Quor Gallek to acquire both trophies – once committed, treachery was an easy habit to fall into, he had discovered – but he needed the Dark Apostle and his affinity with the warp to guarantee passage back out of the storm.

A bargain had been struck. A *pact.*

‘You’ll get your stone and when I’ve cast the carcass of that ship burning into the ether, you and I can part ways.’

‘*Nothing would give me greater pleasure,*’ replied the Preacher, bowing before the hololithic connection was severed.

Yes, Laestygon mused to himself, *treachery had become easy*.

Aboard the *Monarchia,* the light from the doused hololith faded, leaving Quor Gallek in darkness.

He heard Degat's heavy, agitated breathing nearby.

'He will try to betray us,' said the master sergeant.

'Almost certainly,' hissed Quor Gallek. 'Which is why, when you have killed Narek, you will end the life of Malig Laestygon also.' He turned. Degat's muscular silhouette was the only visible sign of the warrior. 'Does that appeal to you, brother?'

'It does,' said Degat, sucking in a satisfying breath.

'How many devoted souls do we have aboard this ship, Degat?'

'Over two hundred.'

'They are hardened warriors, yes?'

'I trained them, so yes.'

'Laestygon acted too soon. His hand slipped on the leash of his men, and the Drakes burned them for it. But we are wise and will choose our time. Did you know that when a daemon passes through the warp, it leaves a spoor, a hook that can be seized then followed? Think of it as a path through the Sea of Souls, ephemeral but possible to traverse with the right kind of imprecations.'

Degat grunted. 'Fewer riddles, preacher. How will you use my men?'

'I mean to lead them on a path,' said Quor Gallek as he drew something from within the folds of his robes. It was a blade, slightly more than finger's length, but extremely sharp. Not one of the fabled Shards of Erebus – this knife did not part the materium. It had a different purpose.

'If a witch uses an athame to conjure and curse, what is the tool of a chirurgeon?'

Quor Gallek turned the blade to examine it, and the minuscule teeth along its silver edge gleamed in the light, so fine they were almost invisible to the naked eye.

'A scalpel,' growled Degat, his humour hard to discern from his belligerence.

'A scalpel,' Quor Gallek agreed, remembering how he had stolen upon the battlefield to remove one of the Gorgon's fingers with which to forge it.

No bone, no blood, just an unearthly metal that yielded as soon as life had left its host. Asirnoth had passed its gift on to the Iron Hands. That power had come to Quor Gallek. The scales of one drake to cut the flesh of another and take what was embedded within.

‘They fell upon him like jackals, Degat,’ Quor Gallek said in a shallow voice, remembering. His distaste for the deed was obvious, despite what it had offered up to him. ‘It was far from a glorious death. I think it might have been fear that made them do it, that made them tear at him like that, as if by reducing the Gorgon to nothing but bone and blood his anima would no longer pose a threat.’

‘I care not, preacher. Just tell me what you plan.’

Quor Gallek eyed him viciously for a moment, as if the madness he had just recalled somehow lingered past the deed whenever he spoke of it, but swiftly regained his composure.

‘We will do as Laestygon asks. But we will take what is ours also and cut the fulgurite from Vulkan’s own flesh. Then, when the Death Guard are closing in for their kill, I will trap them in the storm and leave them to rot.’

THIRTY-FOUR

Miracles

Battle-barge Charybdis*, strategium*

Zytos met the gaze of Kolo Adyssian with hard resolve. In his mind, there was no other choice.

'She has to try again, shipmaster.'

'It'll kill her.'

Adyssian looked haggard, his youthful verve drained by seeing Circe after the aborted warp translation. Zytos had heard from Arikk Gullero that Adyssian practically had to break open the door to the sanctum so he could stop Circe's screaming.

'Hecht believes there is a way.'

Adyssian frowned and glanced at the shadowed figure of the grey legionary standing in the corner of his strategium. The low-lit room abutted the bridge and was filled with star charts and cartographs, those the shipmaster had used to plot the *Charybdis'*s staggered route through the Ruinstorm. To have any hope of getting through it, each warp translation needed to be small and meticulously plotted across known routes. They had barely begun the journey and already there was talk of abandonment.

'With the greatest respect, what way is there that won't kill my Navigator and likely your Librarian into the bargain?'

Ushamann had suffered too. Not as badly as Circe but he looked drawn, standing in the background. Zytos hadn't seen it during the conclave, but now he did, the slow fraying of resolve.

Hecht stepped into the light of a single overhead lumen.

'You must *want* to enter the storm,' he said simply.

‘That’s it?’ Adyssian looked unimpressed. ‘That’s your insight?’

‘You forget yourself, shipmaster,’ warned Zytos.

Adyssian held up his hand.

‘Apologies, my nerves are a little on edge. You have to understand, when I dragged Circe from her novatum, she was raving.’ He licked his lips. ‘To put her back so soon… I fear for her.’

‘Don’t let her see that,’ said Hecht. ‘In the warp, will is everything. Every weakness you have, every frailty will be exposed and exploited by what lurks in the Sea of Souls.’

Adyssian shook his head. ‘I have travelled the warp. I’ve even seen men driven mad because of it, but what happened to Circe was something else. Endless night, she said. That there was no light. What does that even mean?’

‘That a veil has been drawn across the galaxy, cutting out all light, all voices save those trapped within the storm. Those voices are souls, and they scream in torment.’

Adyssian gave a humourless laugh. ‘And you wish for me to fly into that?’

‘It isn’t our desire, shipmaster,’ said Zytos. ‘They are your orders, and you will follow them.’

Adyssian held his tongue for a moment, wisely considering his words. When he spoke again, it was to Hecht.

‘Tell me then, how is it to be done?’

‘Imagine the veil as a thin ream of black cloth,’ said Hecht. ‘From a distance, anything that touches it, any light – be that the Astronomican or the psychic impression cast out by an astropath – is absorbed. Nullified. But a narrow sliver of light can penetrate what a shaft cannot, eking through the minute imperfections in the cloth, shining on what lies ahead and, eventually, beyond the veil. If we can see the way ahead, we can see our path. Travel far enough and our destination will become visible also.’

‘In a dark night, the mariners of old would use lanterns to light their way,’ said Adyssian. ‘But what light do we have that will breach this tempest?’

‘On Sotha there was a beacon that illuminated Macragge,’ said Zytos. ‘It was how we reached Ultramar through the storm.’

‘A safe haven,’ said Hecht, ‘a fixed port.’

‘We have neither,’ said Adyssian.

‘Your mariner, if he came across a reef, what would he do?’ asked Hecht.

‘Trim the sails to slow down the ship and use his lantern to find the rocks.’

‘Except in the Ruinstorm, the rocks are the discordant cries of damned souls

and the fell creatures spawned by them. It is raw emotion made manifest.'

Zytos exchanged a glance with Ushamann but the Librarian was listening intently and had no further insight. He did, however, ask the question that was on Zytos's mind.

'How can you know this? Such knowledge is… dangerous.'

Hecht met Ushamann's questioning gaze.

'All knowledge, if improperly applied, is dangerous,' he said, as if that were sufficient answer. 'Whatever emotional turmoil you bring with you when you enter the storm, fear, hate, jealousy… it is echoed a thousandfold… ten thousandfold once inside.'

Though he tried not to, Adyssian could not help but summon the memory of Maelyssa. How he thought he had buried it, but when he saw the refugee girl…

'You must master your emotions or they will consume you. They will consume us all,' Hecht said. 'Have you ever seen or fought a daemon? I don't mean one that has burrowed into a living host and slowly hollowed it, I mean an *actual* Neverborn.'

Zytos remembered the creature he had fought alongside his brothers and the Ultramarines on Macragge. He remembered how the monster within Xenut Sul's body had yearned for release, how it had stretched his skin and mutated him.

'Unburdened…' He spoke the word without realising he had said it at first.

All eyes turned. Hecht's narrowed.

'Possessed flesh is a pale shadow of what we may face in the Ruinstorm. Your rage, your fear and hate, every envious thought, every scheme, each and every part of you will return embodied, twisted, and seek to devour its creator.

'Only hope will guide us through the storm,' said Hecht, echoing Ushamann's words from earlier, 'and a willingness to embrace our fate.'

'You cannot expect the mortal crew not to have fear,' said Zytos.

'Then keep them close, or keep them shackled. Weakness will undo us. But do not think any of us are immune. Can you tell me you have never acted in dishonour, out of wrath or a desire for unjust vengeance?'

Zytos still bore the bruises of his fight with Numeon. He had wanted to kill him, at least some small part of him had. And his wounded pride at standing down as leader of the Pyre…

'Vulkan taught us temperance, and gave us the Promethean creed,' said Zytos. 'It will gird us in the dark days ahead.'

Hecht spread his hands.

'Then there is nothing else I can teach you.'

Ushamann bowed his head to leave.

'I will ensure the Navigator and I are well prepared.'

Adyssian watched him go, but still looked unconvinced.

'Hope?' he asked. 'What hope is there?'

'Numeon,' said Zytos, as if that explained everything. 'Numeon has given us hope. Try again, shipmaster,' he said. 'Circe must enter the storm and hold to her course.'

'And if she dies because of it?'

Zytos's face darkened, but showed resolve. 'Then we are truly without hope.'

The legionaries departed the strategium, leaving Adyssian to his thoughts. He stared at the charts for a few minutes, trying to imagine a scenario that did not end in failure and death. Then he activated a private vox-channel to the novatum.

'*They want me to go back, don't they?*' said Circe, without the need for Adyssian to ask.

'Yes.'

'*Have you seen her again?*'

'No, not yet. I have been on the bridge.'

'*Keep her away, Kolo. Please.*'

'I will, I promise.' He struggled to keep his voice level, the agony of the memory as fresh as it had ever been, like a raw wound exposed to air.

'*She can't be in here with me when I go back.*'

'I know, Circe… You don't have to do this.'

'*Yes, I do.*'

She cut the link. In the half-light of the strategium, Adyssian hung his head.

Gargo had taken them to the forges. They sat around a workbench in one of the weapons rooms where some of the black-smiter's labours rested in tall racks. The air was redolent of ash and smoke, and the dingy light cast deep shadows. Flickering firelight painted one wall, filtered through a small window through which they could see the forges.

'So, brother,' Numeon began, 'what is your expert opinion?'

Gargo stopped rubbing his salt stubble chin to first regard then examine the sigil.

'It's a hammer,' he replied. 'A fuller, to be precise.' Holding it one-handed, he gauged the heft. He even slapped the flat head into his open palm. 'Robust. I think I could forge with this.'

'Nothing else?'

Gargo shook his head. ‘It’s just a hammer.’

‘And a symbol, a sign of the Lord of Drakes himself,’ said Numeon, prompting Gargo to nod. He took the sigil as it was offered, then gave it to Zonn.

The Techmarine laid it back down gently. Mechadendrites snapped from haptic inload points in his gauntlets and began to examine the minutiae of the hammer.

‘No unusual metals,’ he said. ‘Its construction is… common, which in itself could be considered unusual given this was once part of our primarch’s armour.’

‘Then how do you explain what I did with it?’

Zonn’s cold gaze fell upon the captain. ‘I cannot. Logically, it makes no sense. It has no power field, no obvious source of energy beyond that of the wielder. And yet you took that Cataphractii war-plate apart with it like you were holding a thunder hammer.’

‘It was more than that.’

Zonn nodded, setting off his neck gyros again. ‘Yes, I believe it was.’

Numeon covered his mouth and looked down, pensive. He exhaled a long breath before looking back up.

‘When I was rescued by Thiel’s Red-marked, he said they had tracked a beacon, something in the hammer. Can you find evidence of something like that?’

Zonn picked up the fuller and gave it back.

‘There is nothing beyond what we three all see.’

‘And yet the evidence of our eyes does not amount to the truth, does it?’

‘The truth is miraculous, brother-captain,’ said Gargo, the light of belief in his eyes.

Numeon felt uncomfortable at once. He believed in Vulkan, in the primarch’s return and the role of Nocturne in his resurrection. Gargo looked at him like some messianic figure, a flesh-and-blood symbol that would lead them out of the storm and back to the fire.

He rose to his feet, securing the sigil to his belt. ‘There’s nothing more to learn here. Do what you can to bolster the ship. If we do leave the warp unexpectedly again, I don’t want the *Charybdis* to have torn itself apart.’

Zonn nodded.

Gargo bowed reverently.

‘Vulkan lives, captain.’

Numeon was about to answer but couldn’t find the appropriate words. So he just nodded back silently instead.

He made for the sanctum, having not been there since the attack on the

Charybdis, and found Var'kir already present.

He had lit a brazier flame and was staring at it intently.

'How long has it been?' Numeon asked quietly.

It took a few seconds for the Chaplain to answer.

'Since I looked into the flame,' he replied, turning to face the captain, 'or since I came down here in vigil?'

'Either. Both. What do you see?' Numeon asked as he knelt down beside him.

'The same as before. Fire, and beyond that… nothing but embers.'

'Why did you come back, Var'kir?'

'Because I hoped something would have changed.'

'It *has. We* have. All of us. Hope has returned.'

'No, brother. It is blind faith.'

Numeon frowned. 'Is there any other kind?'

Var'kir got to his feet. 'Gargo looks to you and sees the primarch reborn. I cannot imagine how uncomfortable that must make you, Artellus.'

Numeon dipped his head a little, confirming Var'kir's suspicions.

'I have heard talk of miracles, and perhaps there is some strand of fate we have grasped and now follow all the way to Nocturne. But I can see nothing in the flames. I didn't come here in hope of the miraculous, Artellus. I came here to mourn. Vulkan is gone.'

Numeon scowled. 'How, of all of us, is it that you still doubt, Var'kir? You are our Chaplain, by Vulkan's blood!'

'That is precisely why I must be sceptical. For the preservation of our spirit and our purpose, to be steadfast and grounded when others are attracted to loftier notions. If I do not, who will? We are in danger of forgetting who we are.'

'Then why fight so vehemently? Why are you so bent on us going back?'

'Because Vulkan belongs with Nocturne. He belongs in the mountain, returned to the earth. I want our father to be at peace, brother. That is all.'

'*I* want to be at peace, Var'kir. I haven't felt like that since before Isstvan V.'

Var'kir laid his hand upon Numeon's forehead, and the captain closed his eyes at the touch of the Chaplain's black-gauntleted fingers.

'Make amends with Zytos. Regardless of our differences in this, you and I are of one mind when it comes to getting the *Charybdis* through the storm and back to Nocturne. My every effort is pledged to this deed, but don't ask me to believe in Vulkan's resurrection. I cannot.'

Var'kir let his hand fall away.

By the time Numeon had opened his eyes again, the Chaplain had gone.

THIRTY-FIVE

Unto the storm…

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

Adyssian watched the armoured shutters clack down over the viewport, sealing it off from the void.

Arms folded behind his back, he was standing to the fore of the bridge, in front of the great armourglass aperture that had just disappeared behind a sheath of adamantium. To the shipmaster, the vista beyond was the most glorious and humbling sight in existence, the great gulf of space.

He could still remember the first time he had seen it, not the distant star-studded black canvas visible from the surface of Terra but the light of solar flares coursing across varicoloured nebula and pearlescent moonscapes. Back then he had been a mere ensign, during the Great Crusade, but the sight had lost none of its awe and beauty.

How marred the galaxy was now, and how Adyssian's romanticised image of it had changed. Horus crept across the great gulf now, putting out the stars and murdering the suns until the only thing that was left was grim darkness. What future was there for mankind, presaged by such uncertain times?

Adyssian retreated from the sealed viewport and returned to his command throne.

It was just him and his crew on the bridge; all the Salamanders had dispersed amongst the ship to maintain order and security.

I am master again, he thought, but in that moment he did not want to be. Duty fortified his mortal frailty, giving him the courage to act as he must.

Adyssian leaned in to the throne's vox. His message broadcast throughout the decks of the *Charybdis,* to the armsmen waiting in their barracks, to the serfs

toiling in the bowels of the enginarium, to the mortal medicae staff within the apothecarion, to every refugee and imperilled soul on the ship.

'All hands, brace and make ready. We are about to re-enter the storm. Any man or woman, be they crew or otherwise, who has no business wandering the corridors of the ship, stay in your assigned quarters. Those who must attend their duties, I say this – hold to your courage, hold to your purpose, and we will survive.'

He ended the broadcast, and turned in his throne towards his first officer standing by his side.

'At your post now, Arikk.' Adyssian could not remember the last time he had used the lieutenant's first name whilst on the bridge. Given the circumstances, it seemed wholly appropriate.

'Aye, sir.'

As Gullero went to be seated, Adyssian addressed Esenzi.

'Lyssa, surrender control to Circe.'

Esenzi nodded, making the necessary adjustments.

'Navigator has the helm, shipmaster.'

'This is it,' Adyssian murmured. His left hand slipped between the folds of his uniform, finding the parchment he had carried with him since the end of the Great Crusade. 'Emperor protect us.'

He opened the vox to the novatum.

'Circe, we are prepared.'

'*I am ready.*'

'Your shadow?'

'*I can feel Ushamann's presence.*'

The Librarian was closeted in his chambers, both as a precaution to the crew and an aid to his own concentration.

'May He watch over you…' whispered Adyssian, no longer talking about Ushamann.

'*…as you wander in dark places,*' Circe concluded. '*For I shall fear no darkness, and embrace the light of His own truth to guide me.*'

With these last words, Circe plunged into the storm with the *Charybdis.*

The ship writhed, seized at once by the swell of the warp. Churning, surging, the Sea of Souls was in abject torment. The ship felt every blow.

Adyssian could not see it, but he felt it as fingers of darkest emotion scraping at his sanity. He had gripped the arms of the command throne without realising, his knuckles white as he crushed the blood out of them.

A dirge sawed its way through the decks. It echoed around the bridge, whispering through hatchways, creeping under blast doors, infecting the *Charybdis* with an atonal threnody that bore disturbing similarity to thousands of dying screams.

He wondered, just for a moment, if Maelyssa's tiny voice was amongst them.

'God-Emperor,' he wept, overwhelmed by sudden grief, 'preserve her innocent soul.'

As the ship pitched and yawed, a vista unfurled before his mind's eye. He was the captain of a schooner, abroad in a fearsome storm on a lightless night. Standing at the wheel, sails bulging, almost tearing themselves apart, his fearful crew lashed to their posts, Adyssian looked out into the sea and saw only night-black waves and the lightning-wracked tumult overhead.

He felt lost, powerless.

'Circe…' he whispered, only realising he had actually spoken rather than thought her name when the Navigator replied.

'*…black… endless black. His presence is everywhere…*'

That was different from the last time.

'Who, Circe? Tell me.'

'*…malignant, raking at my mind, unearthing… Kabar…*'

Adyssian frowned. He was vaguely aware that his bridge crew were suffering too, but in that moment he only cared about the Navigator.

It was gibberish, the effects of trying to navigate the storm.

'Hold on. Stay strong for us, Circe.'

Metal flexed, the ship groaned and its Geller fields stretched to breaking like the imagined sails of Adyssian's dream.

'*He comes… the One-Eyed King. I feel him… opening my mind like a box without a key… sifting through my thoughts…*' She screamed, so loud it created feedback through the vox-link.

'Circe!'

He heard her frantic breathing now, but at least the screaming had stopped. Circe was weeping, a slow, sullen sob that wrenched at Adyssian's heart like a dagger.

'*I have… the ship…*' she gasped. '*Ushamann is with me.*'

She sounded calmer now, under strain but with some measure of control. Whatever had briefly possessed her had passed.

'Hold on, Circe,' Adyssian begged in a small voice. His tears tasted salty on his lips.

‘*I will…*’ she murmured, the need to concentrate overwhelming the need for comfort, ‘*…as long as I can…*’

The link went dead as Circe ended it. They were in the storm, caught in its swell. There was nothing else he could do now.

‘Gullero,’ he said, rising from his command throne. ‘The bridge is yours.’

He needed rest, just a brief moment away to find his resolve.

Adyssian barely heard the clipped reply before he left the bridge and headed, wearily, to his quarters.

On the way, he met one of the Salamanders. Rek’or Xathen. He had five other legionaries with him, gauntlet-mounted flamers held low and at the ready.

Pyroclasts. Some of the few, perhaps all.

Apart from Xathen, who had his helm in the crook of his arm, the others wore veils of drake hide across their faceplates. The effect was disconcerting.

Xathen gave a curt nod in the shipmaster’s direction as they passed each other in the corridor. He was headed to the lifter that went below decks. Security sweep. Strange things could happen in the warp, strange and bloody things that left sane men gibbering wrecks and turned saints into slaughterers.

Adyssian turned as he heard the booted feet of the Salamanders come to a halt. They had all mounted the lifter cage. Xathen was last in and stared at the shipmaster as he rolled the concertina gate across.

There was danger in his eyes, Adyssian decided, before the Pyroclast donned his helm too. He had seen Xathen’s frustration and anger at being denied combat with the Death Guard first-hand. He reminded Adyssian of a hungry jackal that has had a sniff of meat but no taste of it.

He knew Pyroclasts were volatile, their demeanour, like their way of war, incendiary, but Xathen needed a release valve. From what little he knew of the Legion, he had often thought of the Pyroclasts as the order that most closely resembled the Salamanders’ destructive past and therefore destined for self-immolation.

Xathen always seemed on the brink of combustion.

Adyssian turned away, headed for his quarters.

He was standing at the door, his mind still on Xathen and about to vox his concerns to Sergeant Zytos, when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. *A flicker of white. A light, diaphanous dress. Tiny, shoeless feet. A girl’s soft laughter.*

He crushed a fist into his eyes, and tried to push down thoughts of the daughter he had lost. That he and Circe had lost.

But it wasn't her. It was the refugee, the one he had seen earlier, somehow loose on the ship.

Adyssian was about to summon armsmen to go and fetch her, when he stopped. She was just one girl. He could do it.

'I can do it,' he said to himself, although it sounded a little like an echo.

She had been headed towards the aft, lower decks, refectory hall.

Adyssian went after her.

THIRTY-SIX

Reforged

Battle-barge Charybdis*, foredecks*

After leaving the strategium, Zytos had summoned Xathen over the vox and had him form squads from the Pyre to sweep the *Charybdis*.

The ship had its own cadre of armsmen, but Zytos had ordered them confined to barracks to be used as a last resort only. A five-man squad was maintained on the bridge, but that was the only concession. Legionaries alone would patrol the decks whilst they were in the storm.

Due to its immense size, much of the *Charybdis* had been shut off and sealed. Entire decks lay cold, empty and unlit, the vital life support funnelled to inhabited parts of the ship.

A schematic denoting active zones and decks overlaid Zytos's right eye lens. Constantly evolving as he and his squad advanced through the vessel, the map updated in real time as areas were checked and deemed secure.

'Brother-sergeant.' Abidemi's voice eased Zytos from his thoughts.

He focused on the end of the corridor section they had been patrolling and saw a figure there he recognised.

The others saluted as the figure approached. So did Zytos, albeit belatedly.

'I had thought you'd be at the sanctum,' he said.

'I was,' replied Numeon, nodding to Abidemi, Dakar and Vorko.

'I can send a squad to watch over the primarch.'

'That won't be necessary. Orhn and Ran'd stand guard. The sanctum is sealed. Vulkan is as safe as he can be.'

Orhn and Ran'd were Firedrakes, two of the few who remained, and warriors cast from the same mould as the Pyre Guard.

Numeon held out his gauntleted hand.

Zytos looked down at it, bemused.

'I have wronged you, Zytos,' said Numeon, 'and my brothers aboard this ship,' he added, regarding the others. 'I let my own selfish desires almost overwhelm us. And I raised my hand against you in anger, when I should have offered it in brotherhood.'

After a moment's pause, they locked forearms in the manner of warriors.

'I am surprised you left his side, Numeon. I had begun to think you believed only you were worthy enough to protect our father.'

'As with many of my decisions of late, I was wrong. I know where I am needed. Humility…' said Numeon, 'Vulkan taught us that. He teaches us still, even without the breath in his body to speak the lesson.'

'May his wisdom guide us,' murmured Vorko. Gargo had done his best to patch up the legionary's leg, but he still walked with a minor limp.

Dakar nodded. Gashes from where his faceplate had torn into his flesh marred his mouth, nose and neck.

Abidemi's armour was scored and blackened in over a dozen places, and facial contusions marked Zytos.

Battered but unbowed – it was their way, their creed. Overcome any odds, as one, as Legion.

'Do you have use for my sword, brother-sergeant?' asked Numeon, releasing his grip on his brother's arm.

Zytos's reply was heartfelt and genuine. 'It would be my honour, captain.'

Zonn pressed his gauntleted hand against the inner hull of the *Charybdis*.

'The wounds run deep… Her spirit is a little raw, but she's not done yet.'

Cracks and tears ran through this dermal layer of the ship's superstructure, across the entire deck. Lamps strafed back and forth, revealing further damage. Bent stanchions, ruptured armour plating, fractured seals between sections, it all needed welding and making secure.

Dust motes, dislodged from the rafters by activity in the decks above, turned but otherwise drifted in apparent stasis in the hazy light. No life existed down here. Zonn had come to one of several uninhabited areas of the ship, sealed and shut off but still in need of repair.

Nothing could survive in these ghost halls. No heat, no light, no oxygen. There were bodies, and they floated without gravity to anchor them – serfs too afraid to leave their posts or trapped when the ship was sealed.

Zonn barely saw them. He only saw the *Charybdis* and her wounded flesh in need of tending.

'Adyssian said she had a strong spirit.'

Gargo was standing nearby, piston-hammering a piece of ablative inner plating over a fracture in the hull.

Hordes of labour gangs toiled the length and breadth of the half-kilometre section performing similar repair work. They wore rebreathers and atmosphere suits. Unlike the legionaries, who had mag-locked their boots to the metal decking, the mortals used a cable rig to keep them from floating off into the dark to join the corpses unearthed by Zonn's intrusion.

The abject dark of the long, broad sub-deck was lit by a profusion of sparks from arc-welders and plasma tools.

'I thought this deck had been swept,' said Gargo, nodding towards a body he had seen in the distance then reaching for an arc-welder proffered by a serf in grubby enginarium overalls. A cog tattoo circling the man's right eye marked him out as having received some Mechanicum instruction from one of the enginseers aboard the ship. 'They shouldn't have been down here.'

Gargo glanced at Zonn as the Techmarine engaged a plasma torch to cut away a chunk of badly bent wreckage.

'I detect the heightened emotion in your voice, brother. You feel for these poor souls, and regret their lives were ended in this manner.'

Shutting off the flare of his welder, Gargo turned to Zonn. 'Don't you?'

'Where you see flesh and bone, I see cogs in the inner workings of this ship.'

Gargo shook his head. 'Did the Martians strip your humanity as well as your humour, Techmarine?'

Zonn didn't answer immediately, considering his response.

'Engaged in a mechanised task, it takes an effort of will for me to see as you see,' he admitted. 'I regret the loss of my Nocturnean compassion and humanity, but I know my sacrifice is for the betterment of my Legion.'

Zonn gestured to the vast, expansive deck. His words would have echoed, and not resonated through Gargo's vox, had there been air to carry them.

'It is mundane work, but necessary. A gang of labour serfs could easily do it unsupervised.'

'So what am I doing here then?' asked Gargo, taking up the arc-welder again.

'Ensuring the *Charybdis* doesn't fall apart, as am I. Becoming a cog, my brother.'

Gargo went to work securing the bolts. He was done in seconds. The serfs

worked more slowly, but exhibited signs of agitation and nerves.

'This place scares them, I think. Something primordial about fear of the dark.'

'And so you know the other reason for our presence,' said Zonn.

Gargo smiled. Perhaps Far'kor Zonn had not lost his empathy after all.

'Hardly the work of an artisan,' said the black-smiter, leaving the sealed section he had just finished and moving on to the next.

'I prefer durability over artistry in this regard, brother.'

Gargo set the arc-welder down, turning back to the piston-hammer.

'I hope my presence down here is of some use at least.'

'You would prefer the forge?'

'There is much I would prefer, Zonn. But, no, the forge holds no refuge for me any more.'

Much had been lost in the betrayal at Isstvan V. Many in the Legion spoke of trust, of martial efficacy and the death of primarchs, but there were smaller, more personal losses too that were often overlooked.

For Gargo, it was his right arm.

Under-resourced, poorly supplied, the bionic was crude by even the basic standards of the Legion. From master artificer, Gargo had become little better than a cripple. At least, in his eyes.

'By entering this ship and setting forth on this voyage, we all stepped into a crucible,' said Zonn. 'No one will emerge unscathed. Some of us will not emerge–'

Zonn stopped and turned his head.

Gargo ceased hammering and tried to see whatever had caught Zonn's eye. 'What is it?'

'Something else down here.' Zonn unclipped his bolt pistol.

'Threat?' asked Gargo, gesturing to an arming serf.

'Movement where there should be none.' Zonn glanced to an enginseer who was running the labour gangs. 'Keep working.' He then set off towards the source of the disturbance with Gargo behind him.

The black-smiter racked the slide of his bolter, slamming a shell into the breech, ready to fire. Lacquered black with a serpent-mouthed snout, a twin-nozzle flamer sat snug under the weapon's main barrel and a chainblade bayonet hooked out from beneath the muzzle.

Gargo had named it *Draaken* after the fire-spitting wyrms of Themis, asserting it had both fangs and flame enough to match those brutal creatures.

Through his amber lenses, he calculated atmospherics, distance and spatiality,

but he could find no bio-sign, nor any evidence of what had alerted the Techmarine.

'It is anomalous,' said Zonn, cautiously advancing and activating the servo-arm slaved to his power armour's generator.

'Death Guard?'

'A kill-squad left behind after the previous invasion? Inconclusive…'

'But it's possible.'

'If so, why have they not attacked yet?'

Gargo activated his helmet vox but nothing came back except static.

'Link's down.'

Zonn turned abruptly. Gargo could tell by the Techmarine's expression that it should not be, even this deep in the ship.

'Unusual.'

'Could be a signal jam.'

Zonn looked back to where he had detected movement.

The deck was vast like a hangar, its echoing hallways long and deep. Bodies floated out in the gloom, clenched by rigor mortis and barely visible but for their frozen silhouettes.

'Whatever it is,' the Techmarine replied, 'we must find it.'

Leaving the arc-flares and spark flurries of welders behind, Zonn and Gargo ventured into the dark, where nothing stirred but the dead.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Turmoil

Battle-barge Charybdis*, solitorium*

Var'kir knelt in the soothing darkness of the ship's solitorium. In one hand, he clutched the onyx pearls of his rosarius. The other clenched the haft of his dragon-headed crozius.

His head was bowed, a Chaplain at peace.

In truth, he was a son in turmoil.

Leaning forwards on his armoured haunches, he ignited the brazier pan in front of him and it flared into life, throwing off hot amber light and chasing back the shadows until they cowered at the solitorium's ornate periphery.

Most vessels that served the Drakes had solitoriums for reflection and renewal. Fire-black walls, ash heavy on the stifling air, they were also where the branding of deeds would be made into flesh with a searing iron.

No serf stood nearby ready to apply the rod, though. Var'kir was alone. He needed solace, not purification. Not yet.

Ever since being reunited with his sons, Vulkan had espoused the virtues of sacrifice and self-sufficiency. Isolation to marshal thought and refocus purpose was a way of being to the Salamanders. It fell to Nomus Rhy'tan to instruct the Legion in this creed when the primarch could not.

How Var'kir wished for his mentor's spiritual wisdom now.

Gently, he depressed the catches that locked his skull-helm to his gorget. The clamps disengaged with a hiss of vented pressure and the Chaplain slowly lifted off his helmet.

It took less than seconds for his senses to realign, all sights, sounds and smells recalibrated as part of an enhanced physiological response. As he stared into the

flame, his eyes saw through the crimson of his sclera and not the deep amber of his lenses.

'Father,' he beseeched the fire, 'help me see you.'

The flames flickered, roaring higher as the accelerant within the brazier pan caught and ignited, but nothing revealed itself.

'My lord,' he whispered, eyes watering as he glared without relenting, 'please… show me what Numeon can see.'

Endless flame, a rolling conflagration that stretched to the limits of his mind's eye was Var'kir's reward.

'Is this my trial?' he snapped at the shadows, suddenly angry, as if Vulkan watched from the smoky penumbra. 'Am I to be the doubter whilst others believe? Must I take that role in all of this?'

No answer came, and Var'kir shut his eyes before his proximity to the flame seared them.

'I don't wish to be blind any more,' he said in a quiet voice, his rage spent, desolation absolute.

And in his despair, Var'kir failed to realise he was not alone after all.

A lonely figure watched him in secret, his grey armour the perfect camouflage.

As he watched, Kaspian Hecht slowly drew a short spatha blade from its scabbard.

Rek'or Xathen had wanted to die on Isstvan V. As the betrayal was revealed and the bombs arced down in earnest, he had been trapped in the Urgall Depression with the rest of his brothers.

Eighteen line companies, almost a thousand Aethonion Pyroclasts, hemmed in and butchered with scarcely a reply. After the initial devastating salvo, order mainly broke down. Xathen fought alongside remnants of other Realm companies and scattered survivors from the Raven Guard, whose lines had buckled and spilled over into the fracturing Salamanders advance.

He reached the Urgall foothills to find an implacable martyr's wall of Death Guard, rigorously drilled and marshalled by heavily armoured section leaders.

He had seen the XIV fight. They were tough. Heavy Imperial armoured battalions were more yielding. Between the terrain, the razor wire and the dense war-plate of the Death Guard, the Aethonion Pyroclasts were crushed.

Salamanders specialised in asymmetric tactics but here on the black, blood-churned sand they were outgunned and outmanoeuvred. No strategy, no ploy existed to overcome such deplorable odds.

Survive or die. Kill or die. Die.

Die.

Die.

Xathen went down under a sprawl of bodies. He screamed. In rage for the treachery of those he considered kin, and anguish for the brothers cruelly slain. It was an affront to honour, to brotherhood, to everything the Legiones Astartes had once stood for.

His flame-projector long since spent, he reverted to a combat blade, saw-toothed and razor-edged. And stabbed. The blood of Barbarus drenched his Mark III plate, flooding his breather-grille and gumming the soft joints between the armpit and greaves.

Something flashed, a dark blade reflecting off the slowly blackening sun. A searing jag of pain coursed from the base of Xathen's left ear, across his nose, fractionally missing his eye, before it terminated at his right temple.

His helm was gone, split in half, the scale mask torn to pieces by the savage kukra held in an officer's blood-black hand. It flecked Xathen's cheek, still warm, as the Death Guard raised it up to strike.

A bolt-round took him in the neck, blasting apart the gorget and ripping out most of his throat. The warrior died choking on his own blood. Xathen finished him with a heart thrust, ramming his combat blade two-handed.

Carnage reigned, coming together in a mosaic of pain and abject suffering.

War made by the Legions was unlike anything previously known to man. It levelled cities, turned skies to fire, oceans to steaming vapour and rendered civilisations to dust. It brought worlds to ruin. War made by Legions against other Legions was magnitudes worse.

Tanks burned in squadrons, heaped together like animal carcasses. Contemptors crawled on their bellies, legs severed and drooling smoke. A Raven Guard reached for the sky, but was brought down with his exhaust jets still burning, and stabbed to death by six other legionaries. A captain, clutching his company banner, was decapitated by a las-beam. His headless corpse stood for a few seconds before a Proteus ground him down beneath its armoured hide.

Clouds of acidic gas and other deadly chemical weapons surged voraciously through swathes of tightly packed legionaries, corroding armour and melting flesh.

Above, Stormbirds striving to reach the upper atmosphere were picked apart by flocks of Fire Raptors. Shrapnel descended in a lethal rain. One of the heavy gunships came down with it, crushing a troop of Sicaran Venators attempting a

counter-attack. Their resistance ended before it ever really began.

Dismembered, quartered, butchered, impaled, skinned, flensed, gutted, incinerated, loyal sons of Throne and Emperor were slain by the thousand. Isstvan V had become a hecatomb beyond reckoning, where even deiform beings were not spared the executioner's axe, as the Iron Hands would soon learn.

Proud warriors had become cattle led to the slaughter.

The roar of death screams and weapons discharge merged.

Xathen sank to his knees, overwhelmed, his transhuman fortitude nearing its end.

When he looked up, a phalanx of Destroyer legionaries was already bearing down on him. Drakes and Ravens lay split and bleeding in their wake. Some were being mutilated. Skulls and fleshless torsos had been raised up as grim trophies. The rad-scarred gaze of the Destroyers alighted on Xathen and what remained of his decimated company.

Staggering, bleeding, he struggled to his feet and wished for death. To die standing, blade in hand and cursing the turpitude of those he had once called allies.

It was not to be.

A low whine cut above the roar of the battle, so low Xathen almost missed it. The explosion hit hard, throwing the Salamander off his feet.

Heat washed over Xathen, felt through the slowly cooking bodies of those who had landed on top of him. Shouts, heard distantly through the fog of war, resolved on a breeze tainted with heat and the acerbic reek of metal.

He was dragged from the field, scarred, half dead, into the belly of a Stormbird. Xathen had been only partially aware of his surroundings. He remembered Gargo clutching the ruined stump of his shoulder and the Raven Guard Apothecary ministering to a stricken Salamander before a sniper took him in the back. His armoured form rolled limply off the entry ramp before disappearing back into the chaos below as the vessel achieved loft.

Xathen had blacked out after that. It was his last abiding memory of Isstvan V.

Aboard the *Charybdis,* descending to the cargo decks, the treachery felt that day still burned in the Pyroclast.

Xathen had not fought in the same battalion as those he now kept company with, but he knew these four raged as he did. They wanted revenge, but ever since the massacre they had been running. Defeated. Shattered. Pathetic. It all ended now. With or without Vulkan, Xathen was determined to take some measure of vengeance against the Death Guard Legion, against all the damned

traitors who had ever turned on the XVIII.

They had barely been below decks for half an hour when Zadar's voice brought Xathen back from his dark reminiscence. 'Up ahead,' the legionary growled through the scale mask hung across his mouth-grille.

Kur'ak took up position ahead of the squad as scout. He moved slowly but steadily, flame-projector out in front, the igniter giving off a rasping burn.

'What did you see?' asked Xathen, curt. He saw nothing on his retinal display and cycled through the visual spectra to make sure he wasn't missing anything Zadar had picked up.

'Something…' replied the other Pyroclast. 'A shadow, a form.'

'Both or either?'

Zadar shook his head. 'It was there.'

Xathen grunted, irritated. 'Kur'ak.'

Kur'ak had advanced fifty paces ahead of the rest of the patrol.

'Coming back around! East!' He suddenly burst into a laboured run, fuel tanks clanking against the reinforced promethium hose that fed his flamer.

The other four turned as one, Xathen shouldering himself in front.

Between Kur'ak at its back and the rest of the Pyroclasts ahead of it, whatever Zadar had seen was trapped.

'I have no line of sight,' hissed Mu'garna, stalling to scan the shadowy corridor with his eyes.

'Nothing,' Baduk agreed, shaking his head.

Xathen scowled, annoyed. 'Did you see someone or not, Zadar?'

'A form, as I already said.'

The cargo hold was a mess of tunnels and narrow conduits, chambers and storage alcoves. Some areas of below decks were vast, hangar-like lofts where the near-fully assembled chassis of gunships could be stored for spare parts; others were little more than crawl spaces.

In such warrens, it was all too common for mortals shirking their duties or stowaways to seek refuge, believing themselves forgotten by their overseers. A refugee, a lost serf – it could easily be one of them that Zadar had seen.

But Xathen knew different. His instincts were never wrong. Even before Isstvan V, he had known something was out of alignment. Only his fraternal bond with those he thought were his fellow Legions had blinded him to the truth. Not any more.

Xathen caught it in his peripheral vision. Dirty white carapace against mottled green shoulder guards. Slope-fronted war-helms with slatted grille-masks. A foul

odour. Only one conclusion.

'The Death Guard are here!' snarled Xathen. 'Slay them!'

He wanted vengeance. He wanted honour.

Most of all, he wanted the sons of Mortarion to suffer.

Unleashing an inferno, Xathen bathed the tunnel in fire.

'Betrayers will burn!' he vowed, shouting at the writhing form inside the conflagration he had just ignited.

It took him a few seconds to realise someone else was shouting too.

Zadar again.

Mu'garna and Baduk had him around his shoulders, hauling on the flame-projector.

Xathen roared, incensed and confused. 'Unhand me!'

Smoke occluded his vision, even through his helmet lenses. A warning icon was flashing, though. Belatedly, Xathen realised Kur'ak's tactical ident had turned amber.

Wounded. Biometrics relayed by the retinal feed suggested critically.

Too late, Xathen knew what he had done.

Dirty white carapace became fire-blackened drake-green. A brother on his knees, his armour smouldering, his rebreather fused so he could not even scream his agony.

The fire ebbed, Xathen's weapon shut off by his comrades. He remembered slumping against a crate of medicae supplies, his fuel tanks shrieking loudly as he slid down and they scraped against metal.

Zadar reached Kur'ak first. The wounded Pyroclast was still burning as he fell onto his side.

His mind reeling at what he had done, Xathen looked up to the heavens and found someone looking back at him.

He frowned, confused.

'What are *you* doing here?' he asking, slurring the question.

Mu'garna and Baduk had slowed when they saw Zadar turn. He was shouting again, and urging them back with furious sweeps of his arm.

It took another second for Kur'ak's promethium reserve to cook off and for the tank he carried it in to explode.

Kur'ak and Zadar were blasted apart. Mu'garna and Baduk were ripped off their feet and thrown into a bulkhead. Armour plate cracked, audible above the explosion.

The memory of Isstvan V reared its ugly head again and, for the second time

during his life, Xathen burned.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Bad spirits

Battle-barge Charybdis*, uninhabited lower decks*

Adyssian had followed the refugee girl as far as the lower decks.

He had almost caught her in the refectory, chasing her through a labyrinth of benches and stools, the scent of stale recycled rations tainting the air, but she had slipped away. Her laughter mocked him, echoing in the expansive ship's mess, which was unnervingly desolate with the *Charybdis* on lockdown.

Hard as he tried, he could not catch her. She was always a little farther ahead, her dainty form disappearing behind a bulkhead and her grubby white dress trailing in her wake like little angelic wings. Always, though, she left enough of a trail for him to follow.

'Girl!' Adyssian had called out more than once. 'Come here, girl. It isn't safe for you.'

'It isn't safe for you…' the girl repeated, giggling. 'Chase! Chase!' she cried gleefully.

It struck Adyssian as strange that this was the same terrified little girl he had seen on the embarkation deck, she who looked so much like the daughter he had lost. He would not lose this one.

He considered requesting help again, but kept his vox-unit attached to his belt.

At last, he chased her down to one of the sparsely populated lower decks. Some maintenance work was ongoing, but the only crew Adyssian passed during his pursuit of the girl had been mind-wiped servitors.

And he hadn't seen any of them for quite some time.

She was standing at the end of a sealed duct, perfectly still as if expecting to be found, as if knowing it was the end of the game.

‘That’s enough now,’ Adyssian told her from the other end of the corridor, eyes straining to make her out in the low light.

The girl didn’t answer straight away.

Adyssian couldn’t quite see her face. Her hair was obscuring it and she was just off to one side, her head slightly turned away.

He took a step towards her, but only a step. What she said next seized his limbs as surely as any paralytic toxin.

‘Daddy…’

Maelyssa’s voice.

Adyssian could barely breathe. His heart raced and a feverish sweat drenched his palms. ‘Not possible…’

She turned and Adyssian saw her face.

Arikk Gullero had taken the throne in his shipmaster’s absence. It fit him well, as did command. His place was upon the dais, the awesome strength of a starship almost literally at his fingertips. Before the war, he had been destined for a vessel of his own. More modest than the *Charybdis,* but a sturdy ship of the line nonetheless. He had served with pride under Kolo Adyssian but Gullero had ambition and the natural affinity for void war to match it.

But for Isstvan, his life would have been different.

Sitting idly in the throne, he considered that much else would now be different were it not for the massacre. His thoughts were getting away with him, and he forced himself to refocus.

The bridge was quiet with little to distract the edgy crew. Gullero had already requested a status report from Esenzi and the other officers. No change. Nothing further to do but watch and wait.

Even conversation had ebbed to little more than the odd dull murmur. Anxiety spread like a contagion, worsened with every shudder of metal, every flexed stanchion.

In the warp, a hardened bridge crew had a much-reduced level of agency. To Gullero, it bordered on impotency. Surrendering to Circe and her ability to traverse the tides chilled and unnerved him. For Gullero, returning to the cold heart of the void could not come soon enough. He only hoped the *Charybdis* could weather the battering she was taking at the hands of the storm.

He eyed the shuttered viewport. Its grey overlapping folds provided little in the way of distraction. His gaze roamed, surveying the crew at their stations. Several appeared calm, but their knuckles were white with gripping the edges of their

consoles. Only the servitors were unmoved, their emotional concern siphoned away long ago and replaced by automated doctrine.

The *Charybdis* had several servitors amongst its bridge crew for rapid hard data processing and other automatic, mundane functions. Though they were cold and barely humanoid, let alone human, Gullero knew they were useful, but he still found their presence distasteful. The thought formed anew as he regarded the ship's augury operator.

Essentially a data-interpreter, the drone had reverted to a dormant state, its limbs hanging slack by its sides, its head bowed with chin touching chest. Even the cabling running from its machine body to the augur array the servitor was slaved to looked limp and enervated.

Gullero was about to move on when he noticed something under the array itself, hiding in the thick wiring and power couplings.

A tiny pair of pale hands. A white, diaphanous dress shawling a small, infantile form.

Dingy light made it difficult to see her clearly and she seemed to shuffle farther back into the shadows below the augur station.

Gullero eased forwards in the throne, making sure his eyes weren't playing tricks. He reached as far as the edge of the dais before he saw her again.

A girl, no more than a child.

'Lieutenant Esenzi,' he began, 'do you see that?'

Lyssa Esenzi followed Gullero's outstretched hand. She frowned at first, as several other bridge crew turned to look too, intrigued by the sudden commotion.

'Is that a little girl?' she asked, confusion etched across her usually stern face.

Gullero ventured farther forwards, crouching down as he left the dais and descending the steps leading up to it to try to reach eye level with the child. She was knelt down and just to the side so Gullero couldn't quite see her face, obscured as it was behind strands of long black hair.

'It's all right,' he said, though he felt a tremor of unease in his gut, as if he had eaten something bad in the refectory. 'You can come out.'

Gullero heard a faint, childish giggle but the girl stayed still.

'You can't stay under there,' he told her, closing on the augur station. 'You don't belong here.'

'***You don't belong here***,' the girl replied in a voice so deep and absurdly wrong coming out of a child that Esenzi was immediately sick.

Gullero barely had time to process that one of his fellow officers had been violently ill when the girl crawled from her hiding place. Her hair parted as she

faced him, showing to the lieutenant and all of the bridge crew what lay beneath.

To his immense credit, Arikk Gullero had the instinctive presence of mind to reach for his sidearm. He was even vaguely aware of the armsmen who had been left on the bridge coming to investigate.

But it was already too late.

As he shut his eyes to the fire, Var'kir sagged against the brazier pan. His gauntleted hands gripped the edge of the hot basin but did not burn. Only his face lay exposed, the rest of him was armoured in fire-retardant ceramite.

He had wanted desperately to see, to find some vestige in the flames, some inkling that Vulkan would return. Instead he saw immolation, a conflagration to ignite a world.

Its meaning was lost, much like the Chaplain.

Slowly, he felt himself leaning closer, felt the prick of heat from the burning brazier. Something moved behind him, a scrape of metal against stone, a booted foot springing off the artificially rendered flags of the solitorium.

Var'kir opened his eyes to fire. He recoiled, his head almost ablaze, his skin already burning and through blurred, heat-hazed vision saw an enemy bearing down upon him.

Word Bearer! Clad in the grey iron of his founding.

Var'kir roared, raising the dragon-headed crozius to defend himself.

The Word Bearer came at him with sword drawn but, rather than attack, the Colchisian only parried as Var'kir swung at him.

Spatha blade met the drake-scale haft of the mace. Sparks raked off the edge of the sword, near blunted by the tough hide.

'Only cowards and assassins strike from the shadows,' Var'kir hissed, his eyes streaming. 'I was born in fire, you fool! You can't kill me like that.'

'Not trying to…' managed the Word Bearer, clamping his hand around the Chaplain's wrist as Var'kir's seized his throat. The beleaguered warrior nodded behind the Chaplain, letting go of his sword. '*Look!*'

Something in the Word Bearer's tone made Var'kir turn, just a little, just enough to see the little girl retreating into the shadows at the edge of the room.

'What is…?' Var'kir released his grip, seeing not an enemy but Kaspian Hecht, who quickly swept up his sword and ran at the girl.

'She's just a child,' cried Var'kir, but Hecht ignored him. Shadows smothered the strange girl, and before Hecht could act she was gone.

'Not a child,' said Hecht, his voice still a choked whisper.

He sheathed his sword and gestured to the brazier pan behind Var'kir. It had been polished to a mirror sheen and reflected the back of the Chaplain's armour. Visible through the haze were two tiny handprints against his shoulder guards, too high and too wide to have belonged to a little girl but present nonetheless.

'Not even close,' uttered Hecht.

'I thought you were…'

'I know what you thought. She would have burned you alive in that flame.'

'I didn't realise… How, though? She was just–'

'Not a child,' Hecht reminded him.

Var'kir tried to raise his brothers, but got no response from the vox.

'Dead?' asked Hecht.

Var'kir nodded. 'What do you know of this creature?'

'Creatures. There'll be more. Use your mace. Bolt shells will barely scratch them. We are in their realm now. They'll be stronger, tough to kill.'

'Kill?'

'In a manner of speaking. These are not Unburdened, Chaplain. They are *diabolus,* Neverborn daemons.'

Var'kir took up his helmet. As he slammed the skull mask over his face, the burns caught the light. Red raw flesh framed by ugly, painful welts. Salamanders were born of fire but they were not immune to its effects.

'Not given to apology then?' remarked Hecht, only half serious.

'No,' Var'kir replied flatly.

But the cold fire of his eye lenses met Hecht's. Understanding passed between them, a debt was acknowledged and an immediate bond of trust established, one that formed when one warrior saved the life of another.

'We find Zytos and Numeon,' said Var'kir, the doubts that had festered during his isolation usurped by the sudden need to act. 'Immediately.'

THIRTY-NINE

Cold light

Battle-barge Charybdis*, foredecks*

An icon flashed insistently on Zytos's retinal display, a silent plea for help.

It came from the bridge.

Every attempt to raise Adyssian or any officer at that location had so far been met with static.

'Still down,' said Zytos. Vox across the entire ship was the same, as if the Ruinstorm had reached inside the *Charybdis* to exert its blinding, deafening influence.

'Something is wrong,' said Dakar, speaking through a fanged mouth-grille. 'Adyssian would have answered – *someone* would have reached out by now.'

They had paused, the five Salamanders, at the threshold between decks. Below lay the main barracks and armouries. Above, the command deck, where the bridge, apothecarion and other vital facilities were situated.

Numeon nodded. 'Agreed.'

'So we head to the bridge,' said Zytos. 'With all haste.'

Vorko rapped gauntleted knuckles against his leg. The greave was missing – Gargo had not yet finished its reforging – but the wound from the volkite was eminently visible.

'I'll only slow you down,' admitted the flamer legionary.

Numeon clapped Vorko lightly on the shoulder guard.

'Hold here, brother. And if one of us doesn't return soon, gather whoever you can and prepare to defend this ship.'

Vorko nodded solemnly, and Zytos could not deny a sense of satisfaction at seeing Numeon step up to embrace his destiny.

The rest moved off quickly, with Numeon setting a fierce pace.

'You believe they are dead.' Zytos wasn't asking.

'I believe they might be if we don't hurry.'

The hard metallic impacts of booted feet resonated urgently through the deck. No one got in their way. The corridors were deserted, the majority of the ship having been placed on curfew until they were no longer besieged by the storm.

'That signal-ident,' Dakar began as he raced behind the two Salamanders officers.

Zytos already knew what the other legionary was thinking.

'Extreme warning, yes, I saw that too.'

Numeon's expression darkened behind his fearsome drake mask. It was clear even in the tone of his voice. 'Someone must still have been alive to raise it. Whether they still are depends on who, or *what,* has taken the bridge.'

They would find out soon.

'An attack?' asked Abidemi. 'We are the only ship riding this storm.'

The deck lurched as if to remind them, throwing the Salamanders hard against the wall, but they kept their feet.

'I don't think it's a ship,' said Zytos, unhitching his hammer as they cleared the next junction and the doors to the bridge came into view. 'But it's not only ships that sail the seas of the warp.'

As they reached the bridge's outer threshold, nothing obvious presented itself. No evidence of breach or weapons discharge of any kind. No bodies either.

'Insurgents we missed?' suggested Dakar, unclamping his boltgun from the side of his generator.

Numeon shook his head. 'Not Death Guard. This feels different.' He gripped the sigil, having already drawn *Draukoros* in the other hand. The fang-toothed blade shone hungrily in the dingy light.

'What then?' asked Zytos.

Numeon pressed his ear against the unyielding metal, listening through his helm's auto-senses.

'I hear nothing. No commotion of any kind.'

'Are we too late?' asked Zytos.

'No,' Numeon uttered in a rasp, edging away from the door again. 'Something's in there. I could hear it. Something that can infiltrate our ship unseen and silence it with barely a hand raised in opposition.' His eye lenses met Zytos's; the sergeant had taken up a position on the opposite side of the arch frame.

'Suppressing fire, then draw swords,' he said to the others, remembering what

Aeonid Thiel had told them about daemons.

Dakar and Abidemi nodded in unison.

Mag-clamping the sigil to his belt for a moment, Numeon tried the doors. They were immense, easily large enough for several legionaries to pass through abreast or for a Dreadnought to walk under without needing to stoop. Several metres thick, it would take lascutters and blasting charges to bore through. During warp transit, especially in the storm, the doors should have been secured.

Numeon found them unbarred. He gestured to Dakar and Abidemi, who took up ready positions outside the door. One favoured his bolter snagged in the crook of his shoulder; the other held it low and braced against his armoured hip.

'Find your targets, single shots,' Numeon told them. 'Remember, there could be mortals in there who are our allies. By the same token, those mortals might not be who or what they seem.'

Not everyone in the scattered Legion had seen and fought against the unnatural. At least, they hadn't *knowingly.* Unburdened, Neverborn, they had several names and all anyone knew for sure was they were old, powerful and dangerous.

'Hold this door,' Numeon told the two line troopers. 'Nothing enters, nothing leaves without our say so. Once Zytos and I have cleared the bridge, follow up as rearguard. Understood?'

The two nodded, as Numeon turned back to his sergeant.

'You and I are going in.'

Zytos confirmed his readiness. His fists clenched around the haft of his thunder hammer.

Then the blast doors parted, admitting them to a scene of visceral carnage. The bridge had become an abattoir, barely recognisable behind a veil of gore. Bodies were strewn about, some facedown, slain as they fled, others impaled by struts of rebar wrenched from the walls. The hot metal stink of freshly spilled arterial blood throbbed on the air, churning through the atmosphere recyclers until they slowed and clogged.

Deep crimson, accented by the intermittent flash of stark overhead lumes, painted every surface. Frozen expressions of horror, bent and broken limbs were captured in the light.

Corpses suspended from the ceiling by their own intestines swayed gently like dormant marionettes. They were dolls, mere playthings to whatever monster had torn and tortured them.

It was waiting in the shadows, though neither Salamander saw it at first.

Zytos made the first error.

‘A survivor,’ he called out grimly to Numeon, who had moved to the other side of the bridge. Both Salamanders advanced slowly. With the atmosphere recyclers shut down, it was deathly quiet. The energy feed from Zytos’s thunder hammer gave off an irritated hum as he crept towards the little girl. She was hiding under a console, just visible between the legs of a servitor who had been bifurcated across the waist. For the moment, it was impossible to find the torso amongst all the other body parts.

‘Clear the room first,’ Numeon told him.

‘It’s a child, brother.’

Zytos had almost reached her when he saw the blood. It was the pattern of it that gave him pause. Her white dress was pristine. Her little feet left prints across the entire deck. In places, they didn’t look like a little girl’s feet any more. Zytos couldn’t see her face. Too much hair, too black, too lank, too long, hung over it. But her hands were so bloody, like she had dug them into the deep red places of these poor souls and just ripped.

So he paused, the hand reaching out to cradle her into the light clenching into a fist.

‘Numeon!’

She shrank back, giggling in two voices blended together but slightly out of synch.

Zytos’s blow crushed the remains of the servitor and sundered the console in a welter of sparks and twisted metal. He kicked aside what was left, but the girl was no longer there.

She was hiding at the back of the room, in the shadow of the blanked viewport.

‘You shouldn’t be here…’ she uttered, sounding disturbingly like Arikk Gullero, though the first officer of the *Charybdis* had been amongst the first corpses they had found.

‘Leave this ship, you fiend!’ Numeon was moving around to outflank the girl even as Zytos came at her directly.

Her head snapped around, still obscured by all that hair, though there was something writhing and serpentine about it now.

‘Vulkan is dead,’ she spat, giggling, the deep and resonant voice her own at last. ***‘No one believes you. Vulkan is dead. You can’t come back. No one comes back.’***

The Salamanders got to her at the same time, but as she backed away from their raised weapons, she became one with the shadows.

Zytos cast about, looking for her.

Numeon sheathed his sword. ‘She’s gone. Don’t waste your efforts, brother.’

‘What was that thing? Like Xenut Sul?’

‘Hecht said we would face worse in this storm.’ Numeon regarded the charnel pit before them. ‘*This* horror is worse.’ He paused, his hand slipping back around the grip of *Draukoros*.

There *was* a survivor, a tiny figure shuffled tight into an alcove. Spattered with blood, almost wrenched into a foetal position as she was, he barely recognised Lyssa Esenzi looking up at him from across the bridge with terrified eyes.

Numeon released his grip on his sword and went over to her.

‘Throne of Terra…’ breathed Zytos as he looked down at the dishevelled officer.

Numeon had sunk to his haunches and removed his helmet so as to be less intimidating. He laid Vulkan’s sigil down in front of him, so he could keep it in sight at all times. It still felt warm to the touch and gave off a faint aura of heat. It had started doing so since just before they had entered the bridge.

‘Are you injured, lieutenant?’ Numeon asked gently, but used her rank to remind her who she was, and of her duty to the ship.

Esenzi slowly shook her head.

‘I don’t…’ she began, struggling to form the words. ‘I don’t think so.’

She was covered in so much blood, it was hard to tell if any of it was hers.

She held on to something, a small charm that she had hidden beneath her uniform. Delicately, though her hands were tiny in his, Numeon eased Esenzi’s fingers open so he could see it.

It was a simple gold aquila, strung on a thin chain around Esenzi’s neck. On the back, she had etched a symbol of a hammer. Vulkan’s symbol.

‘I prayed,’ she gasped, relieved to confess but also fearful of what the secular legionaries might do. Religiosity was a heretic sin, but the Emperor’s enlightenment had seen its share of challenges to that belief.

Numeon gave her a sad smile as he closed Esenzi’s fingers back around the charm. ‘Keep this close,’ he told her. ‘Show no one.’

Zytos had seen everything but said nothing. Like Numeon, he had witnessed things beyond the ken of mortal understanding, things that defied the bastions of reason and left few explanations beyond the arcane.

Numeon rose to his feet and beckoned the others to come in.

‘We need to keep her safe and find Adyssian,’ he told Zytos.

‘We can’t do that here.’

‘Agreed.’

‘Then where?’

The vox crackled over the feed, the first time any contact had been made with it in a while.

It was Zonn.

‘*Something has been interfering with our communications, brother-captain,*’ said the Techmarine. ‘*I believe we have just met it down on one of the ghost decks.*’

‘A little girl in a white dress?’

‘*Precisely.*’

‘Any casualties?’

‘*We fired first and forewent the interrogatives.*’

Numeon raised an eyebrow at the Techmarine’s apparent callousness. ‘You opened fire on a child?’

‘*She wasn’t breathing and had survived temperatures inimical to human function. I also noticed a tiny fissure in our warp shielding before Gargo and I made contact. It suggested something unhuman had made its way aboard our vessel. The Geller field is suffering in the storm. Cracks are forming.*’

‘Is that how it breached our defence?’

‘*I think it was already inside, brother-captain. Someone brought it here with them, though you will need to ask Ushamann or our grey legionary how that was possible. It is beyond my expertise to explain.*’

‘Understood. Secure the deck and get back up here. I am locking down this entire ship so we can hunt and kill this thing.’

Zonn gave an affirmative and cut the link.

Zytos glanced at Esenzi, before nodding to the others and finally looking at Numeon. ‘If Zonn saw her down in the ghost decks, and we just saw her here on the bridge…’

‘There is more than one. A plague has come aboard this vessel. Of what, I have only a vague idea.’

‘Should we drop out of the warp?’

It was a valid suggestion, but not really tenable.

‘Too much risk to both Navigator and our Librarian. I doubt the *Charybdis* would take it, either.’

‘Then we have to fight.’

Numeon smiled savagely. ‘We have been fighting all our lives, Zytos.’ He looked to Dakar and Abidemi. ‘You two link up with Vorko and get Lieutenant Esenzi below decks to Ushamann’s Librarium. I can’t think of a safer place right

now. And seal this damn bridge. It's no use to us at the moment anyway.'

'What about Circe?' asked Zytos. 'Her novatum is part of the bridge. She'll be trapped too.'

'And all the safer for it. Circe can't be interrupted. We all almost died last time she lost concentration. She stays.'

There was no question as to whether she had survived or not. Her novatum was warded against intrusion. If she had died, everyone aboard would know about it by now.

'And us?'

'You and I, Zytos, are going to find our errant shipmaster. We'll need him and the lieutenant here again once we leave the warp.'

'He said he was going to his quarters, before…' Esenzi had found the strength to get to her feet, but still couldn't fully absorb the terror of what she had survived.

Numeon gently laid his gauntleted hand on her shoulder.

'Then that's where we begin. Thank you, lieutenant. You're under our protection now. My legionaries will not leave your side.'

She nodded, trying not to look at the carnage of her crewmates, trying not to tremble too much and to show courage in the face of her noble lords.

'Vulkan lives,' Numeon told her softly, and Esenzi touched the charm she had secreted back beneath her uniform.

'May he protect you as he did me, my lord.' She reached out to touch a patch of ash scorched onto Numeon's armour. Then, with her finger, she daubed a sigil upon her cheek. It was an old ritual, Promethean in origin. Perhaps she had learned it from one of the legionaries aboard. Xathen was a warrior ascetic, it could have been him. Regardless, the sigil meant 'protection'.

Numeon let her go. Something was changing within the Pyre, and that included the ship's crew. Belief, but in something older. He should have chastised her, upholding the secular over the superstitious, but daemons were aboard his ship. *Actual* daemons that defied nature and encouraged the terrifying belief in old, malicious gods. Numeon thought on it no further. It was time to go find Adyssian, if he still lived.

Adyssian fled. He fled without knowing where he was going or what part of the ship he had blundered into. Blind panic had seized him, and the instinctive response was to run.

Many times, especially since he had seen the refugee girl, Adyssian had

imagined being reunited with his daughter. Clutching the tattered parchment pages of the *Lectitio Divinitatus,* he had prayed for it and rehearsed in his head what he might have said to his dear departed Maelyssa.

Those words fled now, just as he fled from the revenant that had taken his daughter's form.

'Daddy, daddy, daddy…'

The echoing voice that chased him chilled his marrow so deeply that Adyssian was almost unable to speak. Defiance and a desire for retribution against the thing that had so corrupted his memory of Maelyssa gave him the courage he needed.

'Shut up! Be silent! You are not my daughter…' He sobbed, the grief of years ago relived again. 'Maelyssa is dead.'

'I'm here, daddy. Don't leave me. Chase! Chase!'

She giggled, the thing that wore a version of Maelyssa's flesh, and as Adyssian rounded the next corner, trying to shut his senses to it, he saw her waiting at the next junction.

'Oh Throne…' He staggered, slowing to a fumbling, drunken walk.

The deck lurched, and Adyssian was thrown hard into the wall. The girl didn't move, but remained rooted, silently beckoning him.

Adyssian's hand slid against an access panel in the wall. The door it opened led to the armsmen barracks. He dared not think what this thing might do to him if it caught him. He needed help. Using his shipmaster's override, he disengaged the lock. The door slid open a fraction, revealing a sliver of a deep red room that stank of sweat and hot iron. It jammed and when he looked up, Adyssian saw why.

Ushamann stood over him, his stern faced etched with concentration. His eyes had a cerulean glow as he focused his attention on the girl.

'***Burn the witch***!' she giggled, advancing towards them both at speed.

'You and I are leaving, shipmaster,' Ushamann told him. He raised his hand and the girl stalled as if caught in psychic aspic. Sweat already beading his forehead, Ushamann closed the barrack room door and left Adyssian with only a hint of the horror within.

'Where?' he asked, transfixed by the sight of the girl's limbs as they writhed against containment. 'Where is there that's safe aboard this ship?'

Ushamann grimaced with sustained effort. 'I know a place. Follow me now.'

Together, they retreated down the corridor. Adyssian had only turned away briefly, but when he looked back the girl had disappeared.

‘She–’
‘Will return,’ said Ushamann.
‘What does she want?’
‘She hungers, shipmaster. She wants to feast.’

FORTY

Them or us

Battle-barge Charybdis*, lower decks*

Var'kir led a twenty-strong cadre of the Pyre through the lower decks. All efforts to rouse the ship's armsmen had failed. Vox was reaching the barracks, but no answer ever came back from the Chaplain's hails.

They were under attack. Again.

How these attackers had come to be aboard and suddenly everywhere seemed impossible. No teleportation signature had been detected, no breach by conventional means. Something else, then – something unknown, and no doubt tied to the warp.

Another vessel, markedly smaller than the *Charybdis* but too large to ignore, had abruptly appeared in the storm. Since no sane traveller would brave this tempest, the Chaplain could only assume their enemies had found them again.

Of the girl, neither he nor Hecht had seen any sign. But she was still present on the ship; Var'kir could almost detect her by the profound sense of unease he felt in his gut. His face still throbbed painfully, though his transhuman physiology was doing its best to deaden it.

She was a harbinger, a distraction to allow their true enemy passage aboard the *Charybdis.* Her appearance only made the other vessel's arrival beyond coincidental. And when he saw its designation scroll across the data-feed in his retinal display, the pieces came together.

Monarchia.

Var'kir's lip curled with the taste of revenge not yet sated.

It was less subtle than the first attack, and confined to the foredecks and lower ship hold. It happened fast but did not come at the hand of Neverborn or

Unburdened.

Bearers of the Word stalked the *Charybdis,* their bodies cast through the warp by the will of their Chaplain and the dark entities he served.

Var'kir recognised him, although the preacher wore Colchisian-etched, baroque war-plate, not the incarnadine robes Numeon had described.

Chaplain met the gaze of Chaplain across a long stretch of abandoned deck. Philosophies, both old, both anathema to one another, collided in that glance.

Var'kir snarled.

Both gave the order to fire simultaneously and the corridor thundered to the roar of competing bolter storms.

Several legionaries from either side were hit before the majority found cover in the alcoves and behind minor bulkheads. The dead were left out in the open, as the injured were dragged aside. Every scrap of metal that stood between body and bolt was sought. Some legionaries fired from a braced kneeling position, others stood and loosed snap shots or blind-fired around pillars and stanchions. Dispensed shell casings began to fill the void between, and muzzle flare flashed like dying stars in the gloom.

'They're falling back,' said Ungan. From Hesiod, Ungan had been a vox-master before the massacre. Now he was a line legionary, and one of the brave souls at Var'kir's side. How quickly fates could change during war.

Another one of those souls Var'kir knew less well, and had scarcely trusted until he had saved his life in the solitorium.

Kaspian Hecht shook his head, speaking between single, pinpoint-accurate bolt shots.

'No, I don't think so. They're headed to an objective, leaving stragglers to slow us down.'

A Word Bearer jerked back as his visor exploded, taking most of his skull with it. A second spun and crashed into the wall, bouncing back into the hail of fire with his throat already shot out.

Var'kir had been checking the tactical display overlaid on his left eye lens. This was only one of several engagements happening at the same time across the *Charybdis.*

We need more men, he thought, bitterly. Sixty-something legionaries to defend a vessel this size against a foe that could appear almost anywhere and without warning… There were too many vulnerabilities to protect at once.

'How did they even penetrate the ship without us knowing?'

'I can think of one explanation,' answered Hecht, dispatching another Word

Bearer with a kill-shot and revealing the retreating form of the enemy Chaplain behind him.

Var'kir tried not to imagine the power an individual like that would have within the storm. He focused on being pragmatic instead.

'Where are they going?'

'Judging by the incendiaries those rear rankers are carrying, I'd say they mean to destroy something important,' said Ungan.

Sudden acuity manifested in Var'kir as if he had looked into the flame and seen the truth of his enemy's intentions.

'They want to bring down the Geller field and swarm this entire ship with hellspawn. That girl, that wretch, was just the vanguard.'

Hecht nodded as the shells caroming off their cover lessened with the rapid redeployment of the Word Bearers.

'If the field goes, we go. All of us.'

Var'kir scanned the tactical feed. Far'kor Zonn and Igen Gargo were the only Salamanders even close to the generatorium.

The preacher and his retinue had passed beyond reach. Further Word Bearers were already swelling the ranks of the traitors.

Ungan leaned behind a bulkhead to reload. 'We can't break through. Not without help.'

'It'll be too late,' said Var'kir.

'I can stop them, or at least slow them down until reinforcements can arrive.'

Var'kir turned his fiery lenses on Hecht. 'You? How do you plan on even getting to the generatorium?'

'The ducts that run between this deck and the one below. I'll double back, enter through a maintenance hatch. Go under, and pass by unseen.'

Hecht was already moving off when Var'kir grabbed him. Hecht looked down at the gauntleted hand clamped around his wrist. 'Is there a problem, cousin?'

Var'kir glared, deciding if there was or not. 'I'll do it.'

'You're needed here. Besides, a Chaplain would be missed but I'm not even supposed to be on this ship.'

The Chaplain's eyes narrowed behind his skull mask. 'I thought this was exactly where you were meant to be.'

'You don't like me much, do you, Var'kir?'

'I like traitors even less.'

'Is that what I am to you? Because it looks like I'm being shot at too.' Hecht shrugged. 'I am an agent of Malcador. You can either trust me or we all die.

We're probably doomed anyway.'

'Get to the generatorium ahead of that damned preacher,' Var'kir told him, and let Hecht go.

'They'll never see me coming,' he said coldly, before slipping away.

Them or us? thought Var'kir.

Quor Gallek had left the firefight with Degat and twelve others. He could feel the presence of the Neverborn, and still sense the psychic tether he had used to bring Degat's chosen aboard the ship. It was like a wire, stretched taut. Pull just enough and upon release, it would snap back to its origin point. Pull too much, and the wire would snap in half instead.

The ritual had required sacrifice, as all do. Every Altar on the *Monarchia* had run red, the vessel's cells emptied of prisoners. Several of Degat's warriors had died before even reaching the Salamanders ship, though 'death' would be too kind a word to describe what had actually happened to them.

Every deed, every pact brought a cost. And the bill was never truly paid. Quor Gallek accepted that; he accepted the price to be part of the great cull. Humanity, and its great unwashed hordes, deserved nothing less than extinction.

A nerve tremor wracked Quor Gallek's body, making him convulse. He spat up blood against the inside of his faceplate. Another cost.

'Did you see that?' Degat gestured with the tip of his chainsword. He was running, and blood on the weapon's teeth flecked the wall.

Through the fading agony, Quor Gallek saw the trails of a diaphanous white dress disappearing into another corridor section.

'Ignore it.'

'It was a child. A girl.'

'No, it wasn't.'

Degat snarled, or smiled. It was hard to tell which.

'One of your pets, preacher?'

Quor Gallek didn't answer. He could feel the hunger of the ones waiting outside, eager to taste. Like a menagerie in reverse, the predators held *outside* by the cage, impatiently awaiting admittance.

And something else. Powerful. Coming… The wire stretched taut. It pulled on Quor Gallek's bones.

'Hurry, Degat.'

FORTY-ONE

Absent fathers

Battle-barge Charybdis*, foredecks*

Vulkan walked the halls of the *Charybdis.* Like some lonely wraith, he moved slowly with barely a spark of life.

It could not be real. Numeon's mind screamed at him to deny it, and yet...

'Father!'

Numeon cried out, feeling the sudden tremor of excitement within Zytos too.

But Vulkan kept up his slow, purposeless tread, his armoured footfalls ringing dully against the deckplate. In a few more seconds, he slipped from sight.

'It's not possible…' Zytos breathed, stunned and a few steps behind Numeon as he chased down the primarch.

It's not possible. The words resounded inside Numeon's head as he tried to remember where he had been and what he had been doing before this moment, but there was only Vulkan, leading them on.

His rational mind rebelled, but his emotions had ensnared him.

Vulkan walked.

It had happened before. On Macragge. Vulkan had arisen. None had seen it, not like this, but it was the same. The Lord of Drakes lived, albeit clenched in some strange and somnambulant state.

As Numeon neared the end of the junction where Vulkan had just disappeared, Zytos cried out.

'Brother, wait!'

Despite the desperate emotion hauling on his limbs, Numeon stopped and turned to regard his sergeant.

'I didn't see it,' said Zytos, catching up.

Numeon frowned, eager to be moving again but some nascent instinct holding him firm. ‘See it?’

‘The spearhead. It wasn’t there, brother.’

‘He removed it – that’s why he has returned to us. He must have…’ Numeon paused, suddenly struggling to think.

This isn’t real...

‘Where are we?’

The part of the ship they were in looked unfamiliar and yet utterly ubiquitous.

Numeon shook his head, trying to banish the fog across his thoughts. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said, resolved to his course again.

No, wait. Think. Think!

Given the size of a battle-barge, there were many regions of the *Charybdis* he didn’t know. Zytos nodded, the same uncertainty of thought evident in his movement.

Together, they made for the end of the junction and turned sharply to see Vulkan waiting for them. He was beckoning, but did not respond to either of his sons.

‘Do you smell that?’ Numeon whispered.

‘Our father is here, Artellus. He is among us again!’

He is not. This wraith isn’t him. It can’t be him... can it?

It was as if Zytos had not heard him, but Numeon was certain he *had* spoken.

Though Vulkan’s presence was unmistakable, barely fifty strides away, he was shrouded in gloom and as Zytos and Numeon edged closer another shadow slid out of the darkness, like an assassin’s blade silently slipping from its sheath.

He who was one with the night, the orphan of Nostramo.

Konrad Curze.

Both Zytos and Numeon had weapons drawn but Curze shrank behind Vulkan, acting almost as his shadow. Neither could draw a bead.

The smell returned, an odd aroma distinctly out of place, out of phase.

Burnt metal?

Numeon could see no fire. The deck was cold, like the shark’s eyes of Curze.

Zytos was running, shouting for Vulkan to turn, turn and see the killer at his back.

Numeon smelled burning metal, and now felt the heat warming his greave.

I have to awaken.

A hot aura bled off the fuller, where it remained clamped at Numeon’s side. At his slightest touch, the lie unravelled and the dream faded, revealing the ghost

deck and the gaping chasm between it and the one below that Zytos heedlessly careered towards.

Numeon fired three shots into the air with *Basilysk* to stop Zytos from plunging to his death. But a moment beforehand, a flicker of movement passed over the primarch and Vulkan's beckoning changed into a desperate plea to stop. Even from a distance, Numeon could see him mouth the word, *Don't.*

The bolt shells came later. By then, Zytos had already slowed enough, so the warning made a difference.

Before them lay a chasm.

The tear between decks resembled a fanged maw of twisted struts and mangled rebar. A jagged lip of bent metal led off into darkness. Zytos teetered at the brink of it, the lie lifted from his gaze a moment later than Numeon.

On the other side of the gap, the girl from the bridge stood exactly where Vulkan had been.

Zytos made for his sidearm but Numeon's voice through the vox stalled his hand.

'Don't waste your ammunition or your anger.'

The girl slowly retreated, giggling as she bled back into the shadows.

'What is that thing?' asked Zytos, as Numeon came to stand beside him.

'I suspect we'll find out very soon, brother.' He looked around at the cold deck, bereft of atmosphere. 'I can't even remember coming here.'

Zytos slowly shook his head.

'How can we trust our eyes now?'

'Trust your instinct, Zytos.' He brandished the sigil, recalling the last second transformation in his primarch. 'And trust Vulkan.'

Numeon brought up the data screed over his retinal display.

'Ship's schematic has us close to where Adyssian's ident puts him. We didn't deviate far.'

Still shut off from the *Charybdis'*s wider vox-feed, they could locate the shipmaster but not contact him.

Only a single deck separated the Salamanders from Adyssian, but they had to move fast.

As a boy on Terra and later as a cadet in the fleet, Adyssian had heard tales of the sirens. Back then he had treated them with the same seriousness as he would the *myrwyrd* or the *kraeken.* Such beasts were antiques of myth and legend, the tales of the voidborn or ageing shipmasters who had spent too long away from

civilisation.

Since the war, he had seen many things that defied explanation but nothing like the apparition of Maelyssa.

No rational explanation existed for it, so Adyssian had recalled the myth of the sirens. Often in the guise of beautiful women, they would lure gullible sailors to their doom. In the void, that meant the wake of a solar flare or the gaping maw of a black hole. Aboard the *Charybdis* it was even more insidious. This siren had lured Adyssian with his grief, but now its lie had been exposed, it would not be denied its due. His soul.

Even as he fled, protected by Ushamann's aegis, he could feel the essence of his mortality being slowly leeched away. He wondered if it would be so bad to submit to the soul hunger.

'Hold to your purpose.' The Librarian's voice was like a clarion call ringing through the fog of Adyssian's self-doubt. 'There is no surrender for you or I, shipmaster. A soul is not consumed and then at peace. It will burn forever in eternal torment.'

'Did you… read my mind?'

'Your weakness is obvious.'

They had paused for a moment, so Ushamann could get his bearings and marshal his strength. The Librarian looked gaunt, as if it were *his* essence and not Adyssian's being drawn out by the sirens.

'So is yours,' Adyssian replied. 'How much longer can we keep going?'

'Until I can get us to the Librarium.' He sagged, as if the strength in his legs was about to give out, and had to lean heavily on the wall to stop from falling to his knees. 'I have fashioned… wards.' Ushamann gasped for breath, and the glow around his eyes began to fade. 'She is close…'

Absent for so long, the playful giggling returned. Its echo reached them before Adyssian saw her.

'Librarian…'

Ushamann's answer was a crash of power armour hitting the deck. He had slipped into unconsciousness

FORTY-TWO

Life and limb

Battle-barge Charybdis*, generatorium*

A narrow defile, flanked by stout bulkheads, offered the optimum defensive redoubt against attack.

Even so, Zonn calculated it would not be enough. He had been tempted to retain the labour gangs, to rapidly re-task any servitors with offence protocols and violent subroutines. It would take a matter of seconds to achieve. But that would reduce these men to offal. Living and breathing, in some instances, but ultimately just dead meat.

He had sent them to the upper decks, away from the approaching Word Bearers, to seal themselves within their quarters or lockers.

If the *Charybdis* and its crew survived this latest crisis, they would need the enginseers and labour gangs, the servitors and machine-helots that would keep it running. Legionaries knew nothing of such matters, save a few. Or rather, two. And if he and Gargo remained unreinforced they would be dead and of no further use in this regard.

'We hold them here.' Gargo sounded emphatic as he hefted his bolter into position, using the flanged edge of the right-side bulkhead as a makeshift firing lip. He also sounded belligerent.

Zonn had his post on the opposite side, similarly hunkered down, his eyes scanning for lifter activation, forced incursion, teleportation flare or any of several other ways the Word Bearers could reach them.

'It will come down to a close-quarters exchange,' he told Gargo, reviewing streams of tactical scenarios, alloyed to hundreds of data-variables. Weapon jam, configuration of enemy, number of enemy, enemy armaments, strategic

dispersal… As things stood, in no version of events did he or Gargo emerge alive, let alone victorious.

‘We have an answer to that, brother.’

A hammer hung from a mag-clamped loop around Gargo’s belt. He had his smaller combat blade too. Zonn’s servo-arm made for an effective weapon, and he also carried a short sword in a drake-scale scabbard on his hip. Even with the plethora of blades, drills and saws he could unleash from his haptic implants, the modest arsenal would not be enough.

At the edge of the generatorium hub, the wail of klaxons presaged the imminent arrival of a lifter platform. Flashing amber light strobed the deck. Heavy gears working down shafts of cabling fought with the warning drone from the alarms.

‘Don’t let them get too close too soon,’ said Zonn as he took aim down his bolter sight.

The base of the lifter platform churned into view through a pall of venting pressure, edged with chevrons and surrounded by a metal cage.

‘Short sustained bursts,’ said Zonn.

Fifteen legionaries waited aboard, weapons ready. Crimson armour caught the light and shone like freshly spilled blood. Through his enhanced vision, Zonn discerned script upon the Word Bearers’ plate and flesh. He also saw a Chaplain amongst their number and possibly a regular line officer.

‘Bolters,’ said Zonn as the cage rolled back in a concertina of folded metal, ‘and heavy explosives.’

As suspected, they had come to destroy the generatorium and with it the Geller field.

‘Here they come!’ shouted Gargo, and they lit up the deck with muzzle flare and fury.

Ranked up tight coming off the lifter cage, the Word Bearers used their vanguard warriors as ablative armour. They died first and quickly, but were of little importance. Chaff surrendered to the scything bolter fire.

The rest dispersed upon egress, finding cover in jutting alcoves or behind support columns.

‘I count nine!’ Speaking through the vox, Gargo had no need to raise his voice but the adrenaline forced his words into a shout.

Zonn concurred. Six legionaries were down, the dead left where they fell and the critically injured allowed to writhe in pain. Gargo fired a round into the head of a Word Bearer whose chest cavity had been ripped open.

‘Save your shells, brother,’ Zonn told him, ‘and let the wretches suffer.’

Return fire came back at them, sporadic at first but then with greater intensity as the Word Bearers began to act in unison. Zealots and priests they might be, but the XVII were still legionaries and ably demonstrated the tactics of such.

The narrow defile the Salamanders had chosen as their choke-point soon became filled with a hail of mass-reactive shells, forcing them back. A stray shot hit Gargo in the left shoulder. His guard took most of the impact, dispersing force across its rounded contours, but the explosive round still detonated. Stabbing shrapnel cut through adamantium to bury itself in the meat of Gargo's shoulder.

He grunted in pain as a ricochet narrowly missed his faceplate, and ducked back behind the bulkhead, the bolt storm levelled against it steadily chewing up the metal. The black-smiter glanced across a pulsating cordon of bolter fire at Zonn, who was hunkered down the same.

'How are we the only legionaries able to defend the generatorium?' he cried, a sense of injustice creeping into his voice.

Stretched thin across a vast ship, even with many of its decks sealed off and shut down, without the *Charybdis'*s armsmen, the Drakes were always going to struggle to contain a mass assault across several locations simultaneously. They were vulnerable, exposed by whatever was masquerading beneath the flesh of the girl in the white dress.

Zonn had no answer. It defied reason, but they were alone and no logical argument would change that fact. Pragmatism, as taught by Vulkan, had to prevail.

'Let them come,' said the Techmarine. 'We halt them here, eye to eye, tooth to tooth.'

Gargo blind-fired around the edge of the slowly disintegrating bulkhead and was rewarded with a shout of pain from an unseen enemy. It was close. The Word Bearers had begun to advance.

'Tell me you have a stasis field generator or a force shield amongst your many trappings, Techmarine.'

'I have saws, drills, plasma-cutters and a host of reparation equipment. Nothing further.'

'Could we collapse this corridor? Bring it down on them and force them to cut through the debris?'

'A sound suggestion, Brother Gargo, but the generatorium enclave is fashioned to withstand ship-to-ship ordnance blasts. We possess nothing that would achieve our desired effect.'

Gargo blind-fired again. So did Zonn, who knew his ammo count was getting low.

'Tooth and claw it is then,' said Gargo as the last of his shells ran dry and the bolter *chanked* empty. He dropped it, drawing his hammer and sword. He kept the hammer in his flesh-and-blood hand, to evenly distribute the killing efficacy of his weapons. An able swordsman, Gargo was a brawler at heart and crouched low into his preferred combat-ready stance.

Footfalls were echoing across the deckplate towards them, audible over the numbing drone of the Geller field generator.

Harboured behind a reinforced shell of overlapping adamantium plates, the device's housing had a single weak point: a circular access hatch large enough for an enginseer or Techmarine. Beyond that aegis lay the generator itself, a pulsing engine of singular technological artifice, a relic of the Dark Age of Technology.

Without it, the *Charybdis'*s survival would be measured in seconds.

Foolish, the first legionary to push down the narrow defile spat out some Colchisian mantra and Gargo leaned around to stab up into the frothing zealot's chin before he had even raised his weapon.

Zonn took down a second Word Bearer, spearing him through the chest with his plasma-cutter before wrenching the mewling warrior's head off with his servo-arm.

Blood fountained in the tight space, spattering his eye lenses and coating the back of Gargo's left shoulder with gore.

As he was trying to cleanse his visor, a bolt tore into Zonn's upper chest, ripping off chunks of breastplate and severing the servo-arm's cabling. A flapping pressure hose from the damaged armature spewed vapour across his faceplate. He staggered, recovering enough to thrust his drawn chainblade into a torso. The teeth burred, grinding metal and bone. More blood and chunks of flesh spat out at the Techmarine, ruddying his armour.

Gargo was advancing, stepping over the dead to close the gap with the Word Bearers surging into the narrow defile leading to the generatorium. A dying legionary clawed at his ankle. Glancing down, Gargo stomped his skull into fragments. When he looked back up a brute of a warrior stood in his way with bare, muscular arms etched in cuneiform. A host of scars colonised his skin behind the runic script. His face was bare too, but for the rebreather fastened over his nose and mouth.

Both swung simultaneously, Gargo with his spatha, the brutish Word Bearer

with a flange-headed mace. The spatha's blade disappeared in a flare of angry light and squealing metal, leaving behind a smoking stump of hilt.

The mace had to be a power weapon.

Hoping to even the odds, Gargo swung with his hammer but the Word Bearer had a second blade too and it cut through the black-smiter's battleplate like parchment, rending flesh then bone.

For a moment Gargo thought the wet thud against the deckplate was the stump of hilt, until a sudden imbalance kicked in as he leaned hard and realised his only flesh and blood arm had been cut off.

A massive dose of adrenaline flooded his bloodstream, stymying pain and staving off neurological shutdown. A Space Marine's body was genetically engineered to keep on fighting even after sustaining critical injury. Where reaction and instinct would fail, hypno-conditioned impulse took over, so Gargo did not mentally process the loss of his limb at first; he just fought to survive.

Even unarmed, his bionic remained an effective weapon. Before the Word Bearer could finish him, Gargo smashed the blade of his bionic hand into the other legionary's chest. Metal plates parted and ruptured on impact, and the bone beneath shattered.

A savage backhand ripped off the Word Bearer's rebreather, dislodging teeth in the same blow. A feral smile lay hidden beneath the grille-mask, despite the pain of injury.

Rather than capitulate, the Word Bearer fought harder and lashed out, catching Gargo across the midriff with the haft of the mace and hurling him into the generatorium's armoured shell, where he slumped down.

Zonn saw his brother Salamander fall and moved to intercede, warding the narrow defile with his armoured body and blocking any further advance from the Word Bearers.

'You like it bloody,' said the Word Bearer who had felled Gargo, brandishing his twin weapons.

Zonn did not answer. Instead, he brought up his chainsword into a defensive stance.

The Word Bearer nodded, ignoring the shouts of his fellow legionaries, who were pinned behind him.

'Good,' he said to Zonn. 'So do I.'

Blade and mace struck in unison and Zonn had to fall back onto one knee as he braced against the warrior's immense strength. Chain teeth sped by in a blur, churning against the Word Bearer's two weapons. They churned Zonn's gauntlet

too, the Techmarine having to clench the burring blade of his weapon to stop from being overwhelmed.

Veins bulged in the Word Bearer's neck as he pressed down on Zonn's defence.

All Techmarines had varying degrees of augmentation. For some it was to enhance their senses, auditory, olfactory or visual. Others had bionic limbs for enhanced speed or strength. Zonn's extended from haptic implants in his hands to bionics implanted into his neck. He called upon the latter now, rising from his enforced crouch and butting the casing of his chainsword so it snapped forwards.

His oppressor lurched backwards, his hold broken as he was struck in the chest and the chain teeth from Zonn's blade raked across his breastplate.

The blow hit hard, but threw out Zonn's arm at the same time. For a moment, his defence lay breached. He almost recovered, but the Word Bearer was quicker.

Thick plasteel swept into Zonn's neck, and jarred. The blade held fast, snared by ranks of plated cabling and wires. Sparks rained from the wound, and an oil slick poured down the Techmarine's upper chest like blood.

His battleplate registered the critical injury, relaying the data across Zonn's retinal feed, a biometric outline of his armoured frame displaying red warning icons at the point where his gorget met his helm.

This he processed in a nanosecond; his next act was to engage the plasma-cutter in his right vambrace. For some reason it failed to activate. Reaction time slowing to a crawl, he missed the second critical warning on his lens display.

Plastron breach, rib-plate split, internal organs compromised and failing.

He absorbed the data as dispassionately as a cogitator. Only when Zonn looked down and saw the flanged mace head embedded deep in his chest did he realise just how seriously injured he was.

With a violent tug, the blade in his neck was wrenched loose, spoiling his vision as he tried to find his assailant through the squalls of static affecting his feed. A second strike met the gouge laid by the first and Zonn felt it bite flesh.

Blood met oil, pouring down his chest and abdomen in a black flood, draining and pooling onto the deck at his feet.

Nerveless fingers relinquished the chainsword. In a brief visual, Zonn thought the Word Bearer had grown, for the traitor towered over him. Belatedly, he realised it was he that had sunk down, on both knees this time.

The blade wrenched loose one more time, Zonn's head jerking with the violent motion, his visual feed blurring.

'Vulk–'

He stopped short when his neck was severed, and his head came free of his

body.

Degat kicked over the corpse and stepped into the generatorium core. He could feel the energy hum rattling his bones and taste the corposant bleeding off the machinery behind the armoured shell where the other one still sat.

Not dead, but down.

'I'll be back to finish you soon,' he promised the one-armed legionary, shouting over his shoulder for a blast charge.

The krak grenade went off with a dull *crump,* taking off the shell's access hatch and exposing the engine within. Light and noise flooded the corridor as viperous bands of energy licked and spat through the shattered hatch.

'Breacher,' he snarled, and waited for the hefty explosive to be handed down.

It never made it.

The breacher carrier pitched to the side, his left temple drilled by a bolt shell. A detonation ruptured the warrior's cranial vault in a welter of bone shards and matter. Headless, the Word Bearer stood erect for another second before he collapsed still holding the charge.

Degat smiled, staying low as suppressing fire rained in on him and his men.

He had only caught a glimpse of their assailant, but it was enough.

'At last,' he murmured, jerking back against the renewed fusillade and laughing as another of his battle-brothers was cut down.

FORTY-THREE

The Emperor protects

Battle-barge Charybdis*, foredecks*

Adyssian thought Ushamann was dead – the light in his eyes had gone, and he wasn't moving. Before succumbing to this fugue state, he had clawed something into the wall with gauntleted fingers.

Unearths Kabar.

Who Kabar was or why Ushamann had carved his name into the metal was a mystery to Adyssian. A flicker of motion in his peripheral vision took his attention from the wall.

The girl had moved, or, at least, the thing that had fashioned itself as a girl. Dredged from Adyssian's subconscious, it was as cruel an apparition as the warp could have made for him.

'Maelyssa…'

He wept, not because the gossamer-clad *thing* slowly closing on them reminded him of his dead daughter, but for the true memory of what he had lost and all the grief that came with it.

She was close, and the shipmaster was almost able to see what lay beneath that long, lank hair. Adyssian didn't want to and as much as it hurt his martial pride to die on his knees, he shut his eyes.

The crumpled parchment underneath his uniform felt old and tattered, but also comforting. He didn't need to look at the faded vellum pages to recite the prayer; Adyssian knew every word by heart.

'In the Emperor's shadow, I shall not falter,' he whispered, clutching tightly to the *Lectitio Divinitatus.* 'For it is He that banished the denizens of Old Night with the light of the Imperial Truth.'

Giggling that was much too deep and resonant for a little girl intruded, but Adyssian did not stop.

'I am His servant. By His will and my deeds am I shielded from evil, for the Emperor Protects and His luminance shall–'

Loud, percussive bolter fire cut through Adyssian's recitation, and as he opened his eyes, throwing himself against the wall to make a smaller target, he saw muzzle flare and the slowly diminishing form of the girl.

Heavy armoured figures stormed into her wake and the still fading flare of bolters.

'Save your ammo,' he heard one of them say. 'Hammers and blades are the only way to be sure.'

'Yes, brother-captain.'

Adyssian sagged against the wall, his relief palpable. Exhausted as he was, he heaved his weary body to its feet as he met Artellus Numeon.

He led four other Salamanders, including Sergeant Zytos. A sixth figure, much more diminutive than the rest, caused tears to flow anew down the shipmaster's face as all thought of decorum vanished.

'Lyssa!'

Adyssian and Esenzi embraced as two long-lost friends, separated by a gulf of time. The indulgence was momentary, and as they parted Adyssian eyed his flag lieutenant questioningly.

Esenzi knew what he asked; the answer was obvious in her sorrowful gaze. She almost just nodded, but remembered her training at the last moment and gave her report as she had been trained to do.

'Lieutenant Gullero is dead, sir. They're all dead. The entire bridge crew. I am the only one who survived.'

Adyssian tried not to gape at the sheer horror of it all. He glanced to Zytos, who gave a slight nod.

'What happened?' he asked Esenzi, though he suspected the answer lay with the twisted memory of his dead daughter.

Numeon stepped in, his eagerness to get moving obvious.

'We need to get you and Lieutenant Esenzi to safety, shipmaster.'

Adyssian nodded slowly, still overcoming the inertia of his shock.

'Of course, yes.' They needed him, and Esenzi, to crew the ship's bridge once they returned to the void. He smoothed down his uniform, releasing his grip on the parchment in his inner jacket pocket.

Dakar had gone to see to Ushamann, whilst Abidemi and Vorko stood sentry,

watching both ends of the corridor.

The safety Numeon spoke of evidently wasn't here.

'What do you have in mind, my lord?'

'Ushamann was taking you to his Librarium, yes?'

Adyssian nodded to the Salamander. He watched Dakar make a battle-sign against his plastron before he saw the faint stirrings of life return to the Librarian.

'Then we go there now,' said Numeon, glancing at Ushamann's scrawled words but making no comment. 'All of us.'

They were about to head out when the vox crackled back into life again, having been quiet since just after Numeon and Zytos had left the bridge.

Var'kir's wizened voice manifested across the feed.

'*Numeon? Mercy of Vulkan! You are alive, brother-captain. When I could not reach you, I feared the worst.*'

The return was patchy and far from ideal, but Numeon was at least in contact with his Chaplain again.

'Var'kir, there is something aboard the *Charybdis,* some kind of–'

'*It's a daemon, Artellus. I know how that sounds, but we are being manipulated by a denizen of Old Night.*'

'It sounds all too plausible, old friend.' Numeon discerned the sporadic exchange of gunfire in the background and raised, urgent voices. 'Where are you? What is happening?'

'*The lower decks are under attack. Word Bearers, brother, and in number. They had us at an impasse but a section broke off...*' Var'kir paused to release a loud burst from his pistol. It was several seconds before he came back and for a moment Numeon feared he had been injured or worse. '*They are headed for the generatorium.*'

'The Geller field?'

'*What else. They mean to overrun this ship with hellspawn.*'

Had this been another time, before Isstvan, before Traoris and the horrors he had witnessed on Macragge, Numeon would have scoffed at such a remark. Now, it was all too reasonable. With that came a stark revelation. The Imperial Truth, that which denied the existence of gods and deities beyond the natural world, which eschewed superstition and the arcane, promoting science and reasoning as the tools of enlightenment, was a lie.

'I have Adyssian and Esenzi. Who defends the generatorium?'

Var'kir told him. He also told him how the Pyre was spread thin across the

Charybdis, pulled in every direction by sightings of the girl, and by other visions that had led warriors to stray from their posts. The Chaplain had twenty legionaries with him, but had no reliable way of marshalling the others.

'Xathen?' Numeon knew the veteran had been on patrol in that region of the ship.

'*I have lost contact with everyone beyond the cadre I am fighting beside. Everyone except for you, brother-captain.*'

Numeon blink-clicked a ship schematic onto his visor display and found what he was looking for in seconds.

'A route from the Librarium will get us to the lower decks. I can reinforce Zonn and Gargo from there.'

'*Understood. I will try to break through if I can. There is one more thing. The grey legionary is moving to reinforce our beleaguered brothers.*'

'Hecht?'

'*The very same.*'

Behind his draconian faceplate, Numeon raised an eyebrow. 'You let him go alone?'

'*It is as Zytos said – we have to trust someone.*'

Numeon sensed there was more to the Chaplain's change of heart than that, but nodded. He and the others were already moving, and had been since Var'kir had made contact.

'Vulkan lives, Chaplain,' he said.

'*In you, brother-captain,*' Var'kir replied before the feed fell silent again.

Evidently, some things had still not changed.

Gargo crawled. His chest burned from where the mace had struck him. Dented battleplate pushed in at his rib bone, sharp from where it had caved against the blow.

He crawled one-handed and left a bloody smear in his wake, fingers digging into the deck grille, heaving his bulk up with his bionic arm. He found Zonn and briefly clutched the Techmarine's forearm in a final moment of remembrance before moving on. One of the eyepieces in his helm was cracked, and it was making it difficult to see, but he couldn't remove it.

Heavy fire echoed dully overhead, and Gargo realised his audio feed must be damaged too. That or he was closer to incapacity than he realised.

The fight had moved outside the narrow defile where he and Zonn had made their stand. Someone else had engaged the Word Bearers before they could enact

their sabotage. And though the corridor was empty now, bodies still impeded him. Gargo wrenched himself over them, crushing throats or gouging into eyes where motes of life still persisted. He told himself it was necessary, not malicious or vengeful, but every time he remembered the sight of Zonn's severed head the truth became his reality.

Gargo's strength was giving out by the time he reached the end of the corridor and emerged into the deck proper. Pyroclasts engaged the throng of Word Bearers, led by Rek'or Xathen.

As he passed from consciousness, Gargo realised something was wrong. As darkness took him, he realised he could not see the Preacher. The Word Bearers Chaplain had not been amongst the raiders. He was somewhere else, his purpose unknown but almost certainly not good.

FORTY-FOUR

Unearths Kabar

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo hold*

Quor Gallek ran through the ship, taking conveyors and lifters when he had to, but met little in the way of resistance. A few wayward deckhands, easily silenced, were all who had stood in his path.

It was a path that led him to the primarch. Cloistered somewhere in the lower decks, amongst the cargo, lay the artefact Quor Gallek sought. Embedded in the flesh of Vulkan, it might prove difficult to remove. He knew, without really knowing, the Salamanders must have tried to pull out the fulgurite in the vain hope that it would restore their lord. Faerie stories, nothing more, clung to by desperate sons.

Only a special blade could cut a primarch's flesh, one that contained the essence of another primarch. The Asirnoth knife sat innocuously in its sheath, a weapon so sharp it could part even the Lord of Drake's hoary scales.

Quor Gallek followed the spoor of the sisters. He had unleashed them, coaxed them onto the *Charybdis,* and they had not disappointed. Finding the narrowest crack was all it took. The shipmaster made for an easy mark, the assumed form of his dead kin the ideal simulacrum with which to torment and deceive.

It was weakening Quor Gallek, though. He felt the tether against his soul draw tight. Soon it wouldn't matter. He could release it before the line snapped and return to the *Monarchia* with whoever was left. He just needed to reach the primarch's sanctum…

Quor Gallek was arrested from his thoughts by the sight of a legionary standing in his path.

He was armoured in grey and bore no discernible mark, at least not one that

Quor Gallek recognised.

The Preacher slowed, a hundred paces separating them but the distance closing with every step he took.

‘You are no Salamander,’ he said, his hand straying surreptitiously to the bolt pistol holstered at his hip.

‘Nor you,’ uttered the strange, grey legionary.

Quor Gallek cocked his head just slightly.

‘Something familiar about you, though. Who are you, legionary? Whom do you serve?’

‘Kaspian Hecht,’ he replied, and unsheathed his sword. ‘I serve Lord Malcador.’

‘That’s interesting… As what?’

Hecht gestured to the Preacher’s sidearm. ‘You could draw that, but I’ll shoot you if you do. I am faster, and an excellent marksman.’

Quor Gallek lifted his hand away, showing Hecht his splayed fingers.

‘Why don’t you? What haven’t you killed me already?’ Quor Gallek’s eyes narrowed. Something about how this one moved, his tone, if not his actual voice.

Fifty paces separated them.

Hecht rolled his shoulders back, the auto-reactive guards adjusting to let him. He cricked his neck, left then right.

‘Because I need the exercise. I killed another legionary before in a shoot-out. I’m owed a duel.’

Twenty paces remained as Quor Gallek lengthened his stride.

‘Blade to blade then?’ he asked, unsheathing his sword. He twisted the haft and one blade became three, turning the sword into a short-handed trident. ‘Very well, but I hadn’t expected to find another Word Bearer aboard this ship.’

Five paces.

Hecht faltered. ‘What?’

Quor Gallek took him off-guard, smashing aside Hecht’s hasty parry and plunging his trident blade through pectoral armour and into the meat of the grey legionary’s upper chest.

He sneered. ‘Narek of the Word.’

Hecht fell, stunned, grunting in pain and not just from the deep wound in his body.

Quor Gallek twisted the blade, churning flesh before yanking it out with an arc of blood.

Hecht bellowed in agony, sinking to one knee.

‘I am…’

The sword fell from his grasp.

‘Whatever they did to you,’ said Quor Gallek, wrenching off Hecht’s helm, ‘it went deep, but didn’t quite take.’ He seized his chin, pulling Hecht’s face up into the light. ‘You look very different, brother, but it *is* you.’ He leaned close. ‘I can *feel* it, Barthusa Narek. I do not forget one of my own.’

He let Narek go, as if discarding him. The stricken legionary could do little more than stare dumbly.

‘A pity that Elias got to you before I could.’

‘Stop talking,’ said Narek, slurring as the carefully closeted parts of his mind unravelled and spilled out into one another. ‘And just finish it.’

Quor Gallek regarded him for a moment, deciding whether to end the traitor’s miserable existence. ‘What did you feel?’

Narek grunted in confusion. Quor Gallek’s face twisted.

‘The fulgurite, you idiot! What did you feel when you touched it? What did it do to you, Narek? Why have you renounced the Word?’

‘It did nothing but open my eyes to the truth.’ He laughed, a slow snigger at first that quickly became raucous mockery.

Quor Gallek smashed the hilt of his blade into Narek’s left temple, rendering him unconscious. Grimacing, he felt the tether pull against his soul.

Degat would have what was promised. Quor Gallek owed him that. Not yet, but soon. And then the Word would be rid of Barthusa Narek.

Quor Gallek left him there unconscious. His prize almost within reach, he had no more time for traitors.

FORTY-FIVE

No redemption without fire

Battle-barge Charybdis*, generatorium*

Xathen had expected his brothers to be dead. Through the crowd of burning Word Bearers, he saw that one of them *was* dead, Zonn's head lying separate from his body. He had never really understood the Techmarine, his cold logic so divorced from Xathen's burning volatility, but he had been a Salamander. A brother.

Just like my Aethonion brothers, lying dead on the black sand, a sea of foes around us, knives in our backs…

Death demanded vengeance.

In the lower decks, Xathen had succumbed to an ague of the mind. Zadar and Kur'ak lay dead because of it, because of him.

Failure demanded atonement, but there was no redemption without fire.

Xathen meant for the Word Bearers to burn in it.

'Torch them!' he roared, his voice merging with the deep incendiary bellow from the firethrowers.

Their armour scorched black, but still vital and wrathful, Mu'garna and Baduk unleashed a swathe of burning promethium.

Xathen was blackened too. His flame gauntlet had been damaged, so he shouldered his boltgun instead. Taking headshots through the heat haze and pluming smoke felt too merciful.

After the first four went down, helmets cracked open and eye lenses shattered by the violent detonations, Xathen stowed the bolter and drew a pair of blades.

The left hand held a kaskara, the broad blade-tip shining in the light; the right hand, a serrated knife almost the length of the warrior's forearm.

‘Do not relent!’

Mu’garna and Baduk did not intend to, advancing to intensify the conflagration.

Xathen cut down any warrior emerging from the firestorm who was more or less upright and cogent. He plunged the kaskara into the slatted mouth-grille of one Word Bearer, hearing a satisfying gurgle of blood as the blade punched through the back of the warrior’s neck and gorget. Another blundered onto his knees, still burning, half choking until Xathen raked the knife across the warrior’s throat.

Cooking blood spurted out over the Pyroclast’s forearm to anoint his breastplate.

It felt baptismal, washing away the shame of what he had done in the lower decks. It could not restore his impugned honour, but it could salve some of his anger.

A pair of warriors staggered through the carnage, lit eye lenses carving through smoke so they could see the aggressor in their midst.

One raised a bolter, so Xathen flung his knife into the warrior’s eye. The retinal light died in one, then flickered and died in the other before the Word Bearer collapsed onto his front.

The second had only a chainsword, his sidearm holster torn up and empty.

Blade-teeth burring, it was hard for Xathen to discern the muttered Colchisian curse.

Xathen’s sudden shoulder charge put the Word Bearer on his heels, and he weaved aside from the flailing retaliatory blow to ram the kaskara up through the abdomen and out the back of the neck.

‘I don’t speak traitor,’ he spat into the auditory receiver of the warrior’s helmet as he kicked the body away to release his blade.

He slowed only to yank his knife out of the other dead legionary’s eye, gradually interspersing himself between the traitors and the mouth of the generatorium tunnel as Mu’garna and Baduk herded the others away.

Gargo was back there, crawling on his belly, awash with blood from a cleaved arm and Zonn’s severed neck.

‘Kill *him*…’ rasped the black-smiter, hauling himself up into a sitting position and clawing what looked like a breacher charge to his chest.

Xathen nodded, his blood up, slowly swirling around each of his blades in a loose grip to shake off some of the gore and redress the heft of both. A sword burdened by blood was an impediment he could not afford, especially when he saw the beast of a legionary coming for him.

‘*Vulkan*…’ he cursed, wishing he had kept the bolter.

Degat strode through fire, heedless of how it seared the bare skin of his arms. He only needed the Word – it would grant him strength and the fortitude to overcome pain, fatigue and the other concerns of weak men.

He saw one such man before him, festooned with guns and blades as if they would make any difference to the outcome of this fight. *His* tools were simple, a bolt pistol, holstered at his hip; a chainblade growling in his clenched fists.

What need had Degat for an arsenal when he had his faith in the Word?

The attack had been unexpected. It had caught them off-guard. He conceded he may have revelled too much in the humbling of the two warriors sent to stop him, but he had felt insulted and needed to impart a message.

Driven from the generatorium by the fire, and the breacher left behind in its tunnel mouth, the current situation presented an impediment to his mission.

Unconcerned by the blaze slowly cooking his legionaries behind him and the reinforcements that had followed from the decks above, he surveyed the carnage around the tunnel mouth.

‘You murder well, drake,’ he said, ‘cutting down men like swine as they stagger blind from the fire, spitting up their guts and choking on fumes. Noble.’

‘My brother tells me you’re next. Are you the one who took his arm?’

Degat nodded. ‘And I shall return for the other. It will anoint my banner. *You,* however…’ He stabbed his blade tip at the Salamander like an accusing finger. ‘You I shall split from groin to crown and leave steaming in a pile of your own offal.’

‘I owe you a death.’

‘You want to cut off my arm *and* my head, I understand.’

‘As long as you’re dead, it doesn’t matter.’

‘Enough talk.’

Degat charged.

The Word Bearer was strong. Xathen felt the impact of the warrior’s first blow against his guard. Even in battleplate, the sheer power translated all the way to his shoulder, jarring it hard.

He was also fast.

No sooner had the first hefty blow fallen than a second came in.

First high, one-handed. And then again, but in a two-handed grip. It pushed Xathen’s defence down, making any counter ineffective.

The third blow hewed into Xathen’s left, and he deflected it with one of his

blades, still unable to bring the advantage of having two weapons to bear.

A fourth the legionary fashioned as a thrust and this broke Xathen's guard, scoring a rent down his right side that went all the way to the mesh beneath his battleplate. The warrior was formidable. A monster. He knew the Word Bearers were zealots, but he had seen few fighters in that Legion who expressed that zealotry in a martial fashion.

Xathen felt hard-pressed just to stay in the fight, let alone win it.

'Are you tiring yet, drake?'

Xathen answered through clenched teeth. 'Thought you said enough talk.'

The Word Bearer *should* have been tiring. Every swing was brutal, with nothing held back.

Warriors simply did not fight like that, not even transhuman ones. With the exception of World Eaters, perhaps. Something was driving him, a dark vitality that had no end, fuelling the warrior's limbs until Xathen was left hacked apart.

Three further heavy hits rained down, one after the other. Each shook bone. A crack slithered down the kaskara's blade, presaging its destruction.

Exploiting a moment's hesitation from the Word Bearer, Xathen lunged with his serrated knife and found a sheath for it in his enemy's stomach. It went deep, and he tried to turn it but was backhanded into near senselessness.

He reeled, watching almost detachedly as he lost his grip on the knife, skull ringing. It stayed embedded like an ugly nail hammered through metal and flesh.

It hurt him, Xathen could hear it in the warrior's heavier breathing, but it didn't slow him.

The chainblade hewed in again, growling for blood.

Xathen took the blow against his shoulder guard, letting it slide and scrape against his forearm, trusting in his armour to shield him long enough to act before it chewed through to skin then bone.

He hacked down with the kaskara, deep into the vulnerable neck seal.

The chainblade kept on spinning, spitting up sparks and metal slivers. It stank with friction heat and burning. It raked his arm, ripped out chunks of cabling, bit into mesh.

Xathen wrenched his blade out and struck again. This time it bit hard and evinced a shout of pain.

A savage punch to the gut felt like it cracked his rib-plate. The headbutt that followed did split the front of his helm. The visual through the retinal feed crazed instantly. A second blow took off a chunk of the faceplate, exposing Xathen's right eye. It bled badly, spoiling his vision, and he staggered as

consciousness threatened to desert him when he needed it most.

The chainblade bucked loose from his ravaged greave at the same time, but the Word Bearer was far from deterred or satisfied. He kicked Xathen hard in the stomach, doubling over the Salamander, who then fell into the tunnel mouth.

Xathen passed out for a few seconds, and by the time he came around the Word Bearer was standing over him, chainblade held aloft to end him. Xathen held up the kaskara to try to turn the fatal blow aside, but saw he clutched only a stump of hilt and piece of sword. The other half was still embedded in the Word Bearer's vulnerable neck joint, having stuck after Xathen's second blow.

Stunned, he hadn't realised the weapon had broken off.

It offered no defence.

He scrabbled around, knowing he had moments to act, and clutched a pistol-shaped object. Aiming it at the Word Bearer, Xathen pulled the trigger and hoped it was something dangerous.

His aim was slightly wide of the mark, but a bolt of plasma speared through the warrior's leg, searing bone and flesh, almost crippling him. It was enough to make him recoil.

A hollow scream echoed in the tight space between the deck and the generatorium, and Xathen swore his thanks to Zonn and the plasma torch the Techmarine had carried amongst his many trappings.

The Word Bearer was chanting, coughing up a guttural, monosyllabic litany of old Colchis. As a ward, as a curse, Xathen had no idea. It didn't matter.

'I've told you already, enough talk,' he snarled, the pain clenching his jaw tight, and fired again.

FORTY-SIX

Adrift

Battle-barge Charybdis*, Librarium*

A shriek tore from the hull, too raw and too tortured to be just metal. If Circe still clung to the reins of the *Charybdis,* it was only by her fingertips as the Ruinstorm took its toll on every worn shred of the ship's armour. It had been this way ever since they had reached Ushamann's Librarium. The Geller field must still be intact; they would have known if it were not. Even in the sanctuary of the Librarium, they would have known.

No, this was the Ruinstorm slowly battering them into annihilation. Everything was trying to kill them, to stop the Salamanders from reaching Nocturne. In his heart, if not yet his head, Numeon knew this was because what they were doing mattered. Vulkan's resurrection was not only important, it was fated. Why else would so many dark forces be allied against them?

Amidst the klaxon wails, Numeon marshalled his thoughts. The generatorium or Vulkan? Vulnerable and exposed, both the *Charybdis* and the primarch were in danger. Orhn and Ran'd were both worthy legionaries who would defend Vulkan with their lives, but the manner of their enemy was insidious and capable of breaching even the staunchest defence.

'Sirens,' Adyssian murmured, his eyes on the shadows of the Librarium as if expecting them to birth some fiend of his darkest nightmares. If the Geller field failed, they would. And it would look like his dead daughter at first, but only at first.

Esenzi clutched his hand, as much for her own reassurance as for her shipmaster's.

Ushamann nodded to Numeon.

‘Go,’ said the Librarian, fatigued and irritated. ‘If they bring down the Geller field, it will take those sirens seconds to infiltrate our hull. It might as well be air for all the protection it will offer us.’

‘Are they sirens, Ushamann?’ Zytos asked. Like the others he was rearming and reloading.

Ushamann sounded bitter. ‘They lured us, didn’t they? Seduced us with their song and laid us bare upon the rocks for their masters to slaughter. Just go. I will keep the mortals safe.’

Ushamann had fashioned wards at every aspect of the Librarium. Some he had carved, others were described in ash. Every sigil broke the Edict of Nikaea, but reason and abstinence would not protect them from what lay beyond the Geller field. The sigils might.

‘Superstition is winning against science, brother,’ Numeon told the Librarian.

‘It has won, Numeon. The fight was over the moment Horus turned.’

Numeon wanted to ask if Ushamann meant that philosophically or if he was referring to the war. In the end, he unsheathed *Draukoros* and gave the order to move out. It slid noisily, hungrily, from the scabbard. The fangs along its killing edges shone in the blood-red light of the Librarium.

Another tremor hit and Numeon had to brace himself against a bulkhead, his gauntleted fingers digging into metal.

He left *Basilysk* in its holster, trusting to the sigil of Vulkan instead. No one questioned it. Most had seen or felt the power it held. How or why it had such power was impossible to say; all that mattered was they believed in it.

Zytos hefted his hammer. The others had short combat blades and pistols, except Vorko, who carried a flamer.

Fire and steel were a warrior’s most effective weapons against daemons, that and his innate will. The Ultramarine Aeonid Thiel had been adamant about that. The loss of Inviglio must have hurt him, Numeon thought, although he had masked it as they parted ways at Macragge. The Red-marked seemed a closely bonded order, not so different from the Pyre. An empty place lingered by Thiel’s side now, a gap where a brother should stand but where only a shadow lingered.

Numeon had many such shadows by his side too, and shook his head to banish the memory.

They are still torturing us, he thought, possessing enough self-awareness to realise what was happening. Even in the Librarium, they were not safe. Though the wardings denied the physical presence of what they had come to call sirens, the minds of the Salamanders were still at risk.

Numeon spared a glance for the huddled figures in the darkness they had to leave behind, clinging to each other as they clung to their shreds of sanity. Esenzi tried to rise.

'Stay down,' Numeon told the lieutenant. 'Seal this door once we are through it. Do not open it again until Ushamann tells you.'

Esenzi glanced nervously at the Librarian, whose teeth were clenched and whose eyes were now closed. Like Circe, he would fight his own battle as they rode the storm tides.

'If we are successful, he'll come back around.' Numeon's voice darkened. 'If we fail, it won't matter anyway. You have your sidearms?' he asked both mortals.

Esenzi nodded mutely. Adyssian stared at shadows, but still had his pistol.

'Then you know what to do if something gets through that isn't us.'

'Take this,' said Esenzi, gently removing the aquila charm from around her neck and giving it to Numeon. 'To ward against evil.'

The Pyre captain nodded, his fierce draconic eyes meeting the lieutenant's and finding himself humbled by this simple act.

'I shall return it.'

'See that you do,' she said.

Numeon turned, his humanity spent for now. He needed a different aspect of his character to surface. Determination burned through his veins like fire. It stoked the furnace of his anger.

Marshal it. Use it. Don't allow it to use you.

Vulkan's wisdom. Numeon felt certain they would need it in the times to come.

They would make for the generatorium and hope Gargo and Zonn still endured.

Hand hovering just above the blast door's release lever, Numeon paused.

Across his helmet lens, he got a hazy visual, occluded by interference and other images, unreal phantasmal expressions created by the over-bleed of the warp.

'Out there,' he said. 'Do not believe everything your eyes and senses tell you. Trust one another. Trust your instincts,' he told them, guessing the visual feed would look the same for them too.

Numeon engaged the release. Slowly, with grinding gear-shrieks, the blast door parted and admitted them beyond the Librarium to the rest of the *Charybdis*.

Flickering half-light barely lifted the gloom in flashes of phosphor white. It did nothing to lessen the sense of foreboding out in the ventral access corridor to the Librarium.

Diaphanous veils of plastek, insulation ripped from metres of cabling, gently

swayed in front of them and obscured the view. Something else stirred in the artificial breeze generated by the ship's atmosphere recyclers too, but Numeon tried not to dwell on that. It was thinly flensed and shone pale red in the phosphorous light. Parts of it, glimpsed between plastek sails, resembled faces, the stretched skin that had once been bound around limbs, a malformed tattoo, a piercing still lodged in the flesh, the hollows where the eyes had previously–

Numeon shook his head and the veils became plastek again. Sweat from his brow ran down the bridge of his nose, inside his helm. A partial life support shutdown had made the *Charybdis* cold, yet he still perspired.

After stepping beyond the threshold of the Librarium, Numeon raised his hand. 'Hold here.'

They needed to wait. Numeon told himself it was to ensure the blast door had sealed behind them, but the truth was somewhere nearer to the desire to wait and see what awaited them in the darkness.

'Do you smell that?' whispered Dakar.

Numeon nodded, his eyes fixed on the shadow-haunted depths ahead. The ventral access corridor they occupied terminated in a junction, one starboard, one port, not quite aligned.

'We all do,' Zytos murmured, his fingers clenching tighter around the haft of his hammer.

Sigils were revealed in the sharp stabs of light from the phosphor-lumes. Dark, and jagged, they had been daubed crudely by inhuman hands. Numeon hadn't seen them on the way in, and they glistened wetly.

Faint giggling resolved on the air.

'Shut it out,' he told himself as much as the others. 'Those things do not belong on this ship. I want them off. Scorch the decks black if you have to.'

As they reached the junction, the giggling grew louder and deeper.

'Find me a target,' whispered Abidemi. The igniter on his flamer hissed. It almost began to sound like a voice *shushing*...

More sails of plastek hung down this corridor, flapping quietly as before. Trunks of ducting ripped from the wall cavities lay strewn like intestines. Wires trailed from the damaged ceiling like veins.

A blow hit the ship, briefly cutting out the lights. They were riding aetheric tides with a terrified steersman, caroming over waves of sentiment and emotion. The *Charybdis* had already taken a beating. Circe might even be dead, leaving them truly adrift.

In the darkness, Numeon remained still. The others mirrored him, with Abidemi

and Vorko facing the starboard corridor. Zytos and Dakar had their backs to them, facing to port and the other corridor.

The awkward alignment put a few blade lengths between the squad as they tried to cover both approaches.

'I see something,' uttered Abidemi.

So did Numeon.

'She is here,' he said.

At the end of the corridor, just in front of the vent hatch, a small figure skipped into view. Her ragged, white dress came down to her knees. She whirled and sprang lithely on bare feet between the hanging strips of plastek.

Gentle singing, a child's voice, murmured across the vox.

Numeon tried to get a reticule lock through his helm but the targeting crosshairs raced madly across his retinal display until he had to shut it down. What he saw through the bare lenses defied rational argument.

Lank, dark hair fell across her face, obscuring her pallid features. No matter how mercurial she was, those drowned locks never parted.

'Lost her again,' said Vorko, advancing a few steps.

Numeon hadn't noticed him moving. 'She's right here.'

'No. Still nothing. Find me a target.' Vorko went on further.

'Find me a target…' a child's voice whispered. She giggled, loud enough to spike Numeon's audio.

Scowling, he looked away from the capering child, still more than fifty metres distant, and saw Vorko well advanced into the corridor. Numeon lunged, grabbing Vorko's shoulder guard and yanking him back. Tendrils of diaphanous white, reminiscent of a ragged dress, retreated from Vorko at the same moment.

'Stay in formation,' Numeon snapped. Visibly shaken, Vorko nodded.

When Numeon looked back down the corridor, the girl was staring at him. She lifted her arm, but instead of a hand there was a claw and she wagged the pincer admonishingly.

'Doesn't take the bait.'

It was as if she were standing right next to him.

'Doesn't like the game…'

Then her voice changed, becoming deeper, older, several voices, each one marginally out of synch with the others.

'My sisters want to play.'

One child became three.

'That's new…'

Numeon had been about to voice a warning when Vorko lurched forwards. Blood teemed down his legs from a deep cut in his abdomen, so fine he had barely noticed.

Before, the child had been content to merely taunt and deceive – now it wanted blood.

'Our caress, our gentleness…'

Snarling to deafen his mind to the voices, Numeon took up Vorko's flamer and roared. 'Destroy them!'

Nozzle fully engaged, he unleashed a broad cone of flaming promethium into the corridor. Then another.

One of the sisters went up in flames, hissing and screeching like a discordant bird as her dress ignited.

'Three more behind us!' shouted Zytos, as he, Abidemi and Dakar switched to bolt pistols. Blades would make certain of the kill, but for now they just had to keep the filth away from them. Numeon heard the hard staccato bangs and felt the resonance at the back of his skull as he released a third fiery burst. Blackened, the immolated siren collapsed and dwindled to ash.

'Two more this side!'

Dropping the flamer, Numeon pulled up his sword from where he had embedded it in the deck. With the other hand, he hauled Vorko up.

'Are you dying here, brother?'

Vorko slowly shook his head. He had already drawn his pistol.

Numeon let him go then shouted to the others.

'Moving now!'

The Salamanders advanced together, Zytos moving up to the front with Numeon as Dakar and Abidemi took rearguard.

Since leaving the Librarium, the engagement had ramped up considerably in intensity, but the legionaries were adapting.

Numeon led them into the burning corridor. Plastek had melted down like wax in the inferno he had unleashed, dripping into long tendrils from ceiling to deck. Exposed for what they truly were, the sirens went on the offensive.

Vorko put three shells in one of the sisters, only for her to spring back up. She was on him in seconds, raking furrows into the Salamander's armoured chest as he screamed and fought.

Numeon plunged *Draukoros* into her back. She shrieked, loud enough to put a crack in his eye lens. Her neck craned until she had turned almost all the way around to glare at him.

‘She cuts out the other eye…’

Ripping out his sword through the siren’s back ended her. Mouth stretched in a silent scream, she dissolved into visceral matter that bled through the fissures in the deck and was gone.

So was Vorko. He slumped back against the corridor wall, failing to hold in his shredded intestines.

Swearing vengeance, Numeon swung *Draukoros* around but found himself alone.

The other siren had gone.

Flickering phosphor light returned to the ship. The noise from the atmosphere recyclers reasserted itself.

‘Is it over?’ asked Dakar, frantically scanning for targets.

‘For Vorko, yes,’ Zytos replied sadly.

Numeon had taken a knee next to the stricken Salamander.

‘What now?’ asked Zytos.

Numeon wrenched off his helm, feeling a brief interlude of discomfort as his biology adjusted to the sudden change in atmosphere. His seeing eye was staring through a web of cracks anyway.

‘We part company.’

Zytos turned sharply. ‘What?’

‘It is worse than I thought,’ said Numeon, regarding Vorko’s corpse. ‘The Word Bearers, the hellspawn they have brought aboard this ship…’ He glanced down at the sigil gripped tightly in his hand. ‘Find the others, regroup. I am headed to the sanctum.’ Numeon arose and turned to meet Zytos’s blank helmet lenses. ‘This isn’t obsession or dereliction, brother. I *have* to protect the primarch. In my gut, I know he is under threat.’

‘He is well guarded, brother,’ Zytos replied.

‘And yet we have no word, no sign from Orhn and Ran’d.’

‘Xathen roams those corridors as we speak, brother.’

‘We too were patrolling when we ended up on one of the sealed decks. What we saw… I do not believe it was purely a manifestation of the sirens.’

‘You think it was *real?*’

‘Why else would he have bade you stop, Zytos? Even in death, he watches over us and now I must watch over him in return. Ever since Traoris, I have known this was my duty.’

Zytos and Numeon clasped forearms, sealing their warriors’ pact.

‘Save our father, and I’ll save the ship.’

FORTY-SEVEN

Interlopers

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo hold*

Unconsciousness had been momentary, but when Hecht came back around the Preacher was gone.

He staggered, rising then falling against the wall and holding on to it for support as he regained some autonomy over his body. It was not just his body that had betrayed him, though. His mind had also been compromised.

Two personalities shared the same psyche, and vied for dominance. He was Kaspian Hecht *and* he was Barthusa Narek, their objectives so closely aligned that whatever neural conditioning he had received had misfired and left him in this schizophrenic state.

Quor Gallek had seen it and the revelation of that when confronted by Hecht's conscious mind had briefly broken him. However hard he tried, as either Narek or Hecht, he could not remember what had been done to him or what deeply buried imperative he had been given to enact.

He remembered his reflection, and how it had looked strange and yet utterly congruous at the same time. He knew he had a mission, and had always known, only the nature of it eluded him.

'I am Kaspian Hecht,' he murmured aloud, but didn't find the words convincing. 'I serve Lord Malcador as his Knight Errant, I–'

No, you are Narek of the Word, his inner monologue told him, but even that rang hollow.

A pool of blood lingered, bled from a gash in his head left when Quor Gallek had struck him. He regarded his reflection in it again, the noble features, the subtle adjustment to his physiognomy, the bleaching of flesh to render a blank

canvas bereft of Colchisian script.

He saw the chirurgeon's marks, discerned the cuts and grafts, the skeletal realignment and muscle regrowth.

I am remade, he thought.

A mystery remained, though, one that pertained to his purpose. It was murky, as if overlapped by a film of memory that almost aligned with a previous impulse but was still fractionally out of synch and distorted like the blurring of deteriorated sight.

'I am Barthusa Narek,' he said aloud, although the face no longer matched the name, and with its utterance his purpose was revealed to him.

His mission.

To kill a primarch.

Narek took up his fallen sword. Malcador's lackeys had failed. Heading after Quor Gallek, he knew what he had to do.

Quor Gallek left the corpses of the two legionaries in his wake as he searched for an obvious way to breach the sanctum. Through the murky glass, he could see the casket of the Lord of Drakes but had yet to lay eyes on the fulgurite.

Again, he felt the psychic tether pull at his soul and knew he was running out of time.

The door to the sanctum was little impediment in itself. Sealed and reinforced, it would deter most explosives and even hold up against magna-cutters for a while, but material obstacles posed no barrier to one who could move by immaterial means.

Ingress meant siphoning off a further portion of his strength, a tightening of the noose around his soul, the very thing he had wagered even to get aboard the ship. But before this last bargain could be struck, there was another impediment that must be overcome.

Psychic wards had been carved around the doorframe, invisible to both mortal and transhuman eyes but not to an apostle of the Word. They made for effective protection against the ritual and the arcane.

Quor Gallek scowled, removing his helm so he could look upon the wards without the barrier of glass lenses impeding him. It would take time to remove them. He took off a gauntlet and unsheathed a serrated knife, laid the blade hard across his palm and clenched it. He then dragged the bloodied knife across the wards and painstakingly scratched each one out, muttering canticles of desecration and unholy worship.

Nothing that was could not be undone, such was the will of Chaos.

Alone, Numeon realised he was vulnerable but he hoped he would bypass the sirens unnoticed, at least until he reached the sanctum.

Calling up a schematic of the ship, he blink-clicked for diagnostic reports, including the hermetic integrity of Vulkan's resting place.

Still secure.

There was some relief in that.

A sudden tremor shook the hull, throwing Numeon to his knees. He grimaced as a spike of pain shot up his leg. Groaning armour plate from the *Charybdis'*s exterior sounded through the hull. Each successive blow was slowly taking the ship apart. Another hard impact slammed Numeon against the deck. A third hurled him into the wall.

Frenetic light flicker indicated an imminent power outage. Klaxons kept up their cacophony of shrieking.

Numeon bit his tongue to focus, shrugging off the dizziness. He grabbed fistfuls of dangling wires and latched on to every internal protruding buttress, hauling his way across the deck.

An icon flashed up urgently on his retinal display.

A vertical-conveyor that led to the lower decks and the sanctum was situated nearby. In a second, the reading went from secure to in danger of imminent breach.

'Vulkan…'

Could he trust what he was seeing? He decided he could not afford not to.

Numeon took the conveyor.

Thundering down the conveyor shaft, Numeon held the rail as the carriage shuddered. As the air rushed past, feelings of guilt began to manifest. He had left Zytos and the others to face horror alone. He had forsaken brothers for father, a body lying in stasis.

He crushed down the feeling, knowing it was the sirens' influence, or perhaps just the unnatural distemper created by the storm. Either way, Numeon's mind was stronger. He mastered his emotions, cleaving to his purpose and his duty.

'Rise for us now, Vulkan,' he whispered, his voice stolen by the urgency of his descent.

Reaching the lowest deck of this part of the ship, Numeon wrenched open the cage and hurried to the sanctum. The lower decks were empty, and the ship resounded to the drumming of his footfalls. As he neared the door to the

sanctum, he realised he was not alone, even though he had met no one on the way there. Not only that, but Numeon had been lured to this place.

'She is here…'

Quor Gallek erased the last of the wards, his face awash with feverish sweat. The exertion came from holding on, from the tether heaving at his soul. He had sunk to his knees to remove the final protective sigil and it took effort to rise again.

He reached for his discarded helm but decided to leave it behind. The close metal confines would only stifle what little breath he had. Marshalling his strength, he uttered a further incantation and stepped through the door as if it were as incorporeal as mist. The warp had bled over the ship – not enough for an incursion of any significance but sufficient for Quor Gallek to pass through solid adamantium and emerge into the sanctum.

Reverently, for this was still a primarch before him, Quor Gallek removed the lid to Vulkan's sarcophagus. He slid it aside just enough so he could reach the fulgurite. Even to Quor Gallek's practised eye, the Lord of Drakes appeared deep in preternatural slumber. Vulkan gripped the haft of a huge hammer, laid across his chest, and the scalloped armour that clad his body was funereal. They were taking him to his final rest, burning him to ash in the fires of their world. Quor Gallek was no authority on the customs of other Legions, but he knew enough to realise that this was what the Salamanders were planning.

His eyes strayed to the prize he had long sought, that which Elias had squandered.

'Impaled like the blood-drinking *striganoi* of myth, or the kingmaker of Albion fable…' breathed Quor Gallek, recalling Terran legends of night-haunting fiends and stone kings of old. Awed by the sight of the artefact now within his reach, he hesitated before he touched it. 'I wonder which you are closer to.'

His fingertips brushed the end of the spear, then, as he grew more confident, wrapped around the haft.

He felt… *nothing* and frowned, unsure of what he had expected.

Narek had claimed to have received an epiphany. Truth, he had said. Eyes opened.

Perhaps, Quor Gallek thought, he had already opened his eyes. He did wonder how this cold piece of uninspiring stone could lay low a primarch.

To see it now, it seemed incredible.

In spite of his doubts, he could not resist pulling on the spear. Unsurprisingly, it did not yield.

Snorting in derision, he released the haft and instead drew the Asirnoth knife. Whether it was the essence of one primarch reacting to the other, or something else, the blade seemed to vibrate in Quor Gallek's hand.

Destiny, now so imminent, caused his heart to thunder.

He raised the knife above his head, vaguely aware of another presence in the corridor outside the sanctum. It didn't matter, he was too close now to be stopped. The fulgurite would be his. And with it, he would–

Quor Gallek convulsed as the immense psychic presence he had felt closing on the *Charybdis* suddenly came into being. There was only enough time for the slightest cut to claim but a sliver of what he actually wanted. Snarling with frustration, he released the tether and the sanctum faded, replaced by a blinding light…

Quor Gallek, Dark Apostle of the Word Bearers

The little girl in the ragged white dress, all alone, stood barefoot in Numeon's path. Between the strands of her tumbledown hair, he caught a glimpse of malicious inhuman eyes. Too large, too black, they beckoned him unblinking.

'She cuts out the other eye…'

Numeon brandished *Draukoros,* and smiled.

'It cuts out your daemon heart.'

Then his smile faded, usurped first by grief and then anger as he saw the slain. Orhn and Ran'd were dead, each impaled on the other's blade, turned by some primordial evil that Numeon did not understand but now accepted as real.

Superstition versus science, enlightenment proven false before the evidence of the arcane and the eldritch. It had turned Horus, he who was meant to be the best of them. What chance had Orhn and Ran'd had against that?

And yet, Numeon still resisted. Others resisted, his father amongst them. A grim darkness had been revealed by this war but it was not without its bastions of light.

And in that small moment of revelation, Numeon knew one thing for certain.

Vulkan had to return.

'Step aside, wretch.' He bared his teeth behind a mask that had fangs of its own.

The girl smiled coyly. She had fangs too, to go with her talons.

'Sacred is six and six is sacred,' she said shrilly in a sing-song voice.

Numeon's boldness took a back step as five more sirens emerged from dark alcoves and shadows where there had previously been nothing but air.

He raised the sigil, holding it out before him, and felt emboldened.

'I am sending you back to the aether,' he promised. 'Now get away from my father!'

The sisters seemed to hesitate at the sight of the primarch's icon clenched so vehemently by one of such belief. For a moment, Numeon dared to hope it might shield him long enough to reach Vulkan.

'She cuts off his hand. She kills the father…'

The sirens drifted closer as one, their tiny feet making no sound against the deck as they moved.

Numeon gave *Draukoros* a practice swing to loosen his wrist and shoulder. Its teeth whistled as they carved through air.

'Blind and one-handed, I would still defy–' His words stuck in his mouth. The sisters had stopped moving. *Everything* had. Even the dust motes cascading through shafts of phosphor light had ceased. Condensation dripping off the

pipes, smoke rising from vents, sparks flaring from shorting wires, all in stasis.

His beating heart like a drum, his breathing a thunderous report, Numeon drank in the quietude and tried to understand why he could still move. Realisation was not long coming.

'You are lost, Artellus,' a voice uttered, brittle and rasping.

A figure stood before the door of the sanctum, too large for a legionary.

A primarch.

Numeon fought the urge to kneel as an incredible sense of immense power and potency fell upon him. He dared to hope, but saw that hope quickly dashed as the primarch stepped from the shadows, or perhaps willed himself to appear.

Bronze skin, flaking to a rough patina of oxidised green. Armour of baked leather, cracked and split. A staff, clutched in thin fingers, gnarled and twisted. Limbs, brittle, colonised by sharp protrusions. One eye, the other a cruel slit cut between scar tissue.

The Cyclops.

'Beyond all reach… except mine.'

Arrogant. Omniscient.

Magnus the Red.

FORTY-EIGHT

The King in Crimson

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo hold*

Numeon cowered before the almighty primarch of the Thousand Sons. Not out of fear – it wasn't a psychological reaction to the Crimson King's presence – but rather he knelt out of compulsion. Despite the urging of his mind, the Salamander's legs became leaden and his head lowered in forced supplication. Only his eyes were upraised, wary but defiant as Numeon glared at the primarch.

It was hard to hold his gaze. A volatile aura bled off Magnus the Red, so hot that it burned to look at it. It was echoed in his barbed appearance.

He was not as Numeon remembered – although that meeting, long ago, had been brief. Here, in this moment, he seemed almost... *diminished*, as if somehow fractured. It was beyond Numeon to fathom how or why, but the impression of it was strong.

'I have wandered the storm,' uttered Magnus, 'and know what lurks within its turbulent seas, as I know what resides within *you,* Numeon.'

Beyond rumours, little was known about the fealty of the Thousand Sons. Scant reports had reached the survivors of Isstvan V of the greater war, and few of these could be verified. Even within Imperium Secundus, Numeon had gleaned only scraps of what the Ultramarines knew. Information was thin, occluded by oceans of doubt and silence.

Magnus might be loyal to the Throne or in league with Horus; Numeon could not tell the primarch's allegiance merely by looking at him.

All he discerned was anger. And condescending amusement.

'Doubt,' said Magnus, and a cruel smile played across his lips. 'It hollows you as surely as any knife.'

Numeon wanted to deny it, to declare his faith and purpose, but felt it would be an extremely poor decision to interrupt the demigod before him.

If Magnus had heard these thoughts, he did not show it. Instead, he scraped his nails across the inner hull and raked his staff across the deck beneath, as if amused at the ship's ragged state of disrepair.

'Hurling yourselves into the warp without thought or concern as to what you do, or the nature of the ocean you sail. Such ignorance,' he sneered, 'such hubris. Wayward souls, all of you, at my mercy.'

Numeon felt his skin prickle in reaction to the heat of the Crimson King's aura, but he did not flinch. He felt the knife-edge they were balanced on, and saw the abyss plunging away on either side of it. He began to understand that Magnus stood on the same edge, destined to fall to a different fate and currently deciding which he should condemn Numeon and his brothers to. The primarch leaned forwards, as if he were getting a better look at Numeon's soul.

'So lost, but you are the one who has truly lost his way.'

'We *are* lost,' said Numeon at last, trying to rise but finding the effort beyond him. He wanted to grasp the fuller for reassurance, for another miracle, but whatever power it possessed was wise enough to lie dormant in the presence of the primarch.

Magnus looked down on him as a king might a peasant, or a man an ant.

'Help us,' Numeon pleaded, realising he would have to convince the primarch of their plight. 'Help my father, your brother.'

Magnus smiled, though it was crooked and more like a scowl.

'You believe I can?'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps I am a revenant, a shard, a figment, an aspect of your fevered mind made manifest?'

'You look as flesh and blood as I, as my father.' Numeon gestured to the sanctum.

Magnus stood straighter, leaning hard on his staff to do so.

'Vulkan.' His eye narrowed, releasing a spider's web of wrinkles across his face. 'You seek to bring him back.'

Numeon lifted his chin. It took a supreme effort of will to raise his hands and take off his helm. He wanted to look the Crimson King in the eye before declaring, 'Vulkan lives.'

A mote of sadness passed over the primarch's face, darkening it further, but in melancholy not wrath.

‘He is dead. Vulkan is dead.’

‘No.’ Numeon shook his head vehemently. ‘I refuse to accept that. I refuse to–’

‘You refuse?’ Magnus bellowed, lurching forwards to tower over the kneeling Salamander. ‘It is not a request. My brother is gone, his mind fled and his essence scattered. You ferry a corpse, nothing more.’

Numeon wanted to lash out, to plunge his blade into this mendacious creature, but he knew his life would end the moment he raised his hand in anger.

‘He lives,’ he said instead.

‘You believe…’

‘So must you, or why else intervene?’ Numeon gestured to the frozen statues of the sirens.

Magnus shrank down again, bent-backed and weary as he regarded one of the creatures.

‘Little *daemonettes*...’ His baleful eye lingered on the sirens. ‘They are Neverborn, soul-hungering husks of things, a wretched birthing of black emotion. They were made by mortals, as all such things are and ever will be. I have seen such wonders within the Eye…’

‘I don’t understand.’

Magnus turned his baleful gaze on the Salamander. He was far from the resplendent primarch Numeon had heard Vulkan describe, but he was as arrogant and forbidding as expected.

‘Few do, except my father and I.’ A tremor of unresolved trauma flickered across Magnus’s face at the mention of the Emperor. ‘Lorgar too, perhaps, though my brother does tend to overreach.’

‘No,’ said Numeon. ‘I don’t understand why you are here. If it is to end us then end us. But the Magnus my father spoke of was wise and generous.’

‘Your father, eh? You think he knows me, my mind? I know his.’

His face suddenly shifted as if his features were things of clay and an unseen hand had moulded them to the primarch’s whim. Brittle became solid, umber flesh darkened to the colour of onyx. His hunched back straightened. His limbs thickened and grew stronger. Bone cracked, as if physically breaking and reshaping at will.

Armour that had been pitted and tarnished took on fresh lustre. The verdigris of age that colonised the bronze plates grew into an encompassing patina which shone vibrantly as the rigours of entropy regressed. Gilded edges emerged from greaves like petals reacting to the sun. His ragged cloak took on the permanence of scales. The mane of red hair, lank and dishevelled, withered away as if

dragged back into a scalp of increasingly black skin.

Head bowed, body shuddering, the primarch had become mythical Proteus of old, but his change was far from fluid. No flare of transformative light filled the cargo hold. It was pain, the agonised rendering of a brittle and broken thing into a more substantial form, bereft of rancour.

Last were the eyes, and Numeon did not see them until the protean form looked up from its torturous change and met his terrified gaze.

The light of embers burned within them, stunning Numeon into silence.

'You have been seeking me, my son,' said Vulkan, rising to his full height.

Through sheer strength of will, Numeon overcame his paralysis and forced himself to his feet.

He backed off a step, looking up at the Lord of Drakes.

'A cruel trick,' he breathed, shutting off his mind to the implications raised by the apparition. Was it so easy to create a simulacrum of his father? Could he have been fooled so easily before? 'You are not him…' He tried to glance past the primarch to where he knew his real father was still at rest, but couldn't see the sanctum or the casket within. 'This is a lie…'

Vulkan moved so quickly that Numeon barely had time to register it before a scalloped gauntlet was locked around his throat.

'A lie, is it?' The voice was deep and venomous, the tone Vulkan's but not the words. He snarled, revealing dragon-like fangs. Black scales manifested across his neck, obscuring the branding marks.

Numeon choked, his neck constricting even in his armour, as he was lifted off the deck.

'Is this how you treat your estranged father, come back from the dead?' A nictitating membrane slid over the sclera of both eyes as Vulkan blinked.

The fingers around Numeon's throat tightened so much that he fought to answer.

'You are not… my father.'

Vulkan's eyes blazed hotter, twin furnaces of anger. A forked and serpentine tongue slid between his lips to taste the air.

'Am I not? Am I so different, Artellus? Nothing that comes back can ever truly be the same, so says the Circle of Fire.'

Blackness crawled at the edge of Numeon's vision, presaging unconsciousness. He fought to hold on a little longer.

'You are not him… I am not sure… you are even… *Magnus*...'

The tension around Numeon's neck instantly relaxed as he was released. He

clattered to the deck in a heap, gasping for breath and tearing off the gorget around his neck.

Bitter laughter issued from the primarch's lips. He shrank again, bent-backed and wretched, the drake armour spontaneously mottling with patches of dirty bronze and oxidised green. The onyx cracked and sloughed away like a snakeskin, revealing angry red beneath.

The hair grew back, the limbs withered and the dishevelled form of Magnus the Red was restored.

Hunched over, a lank mane of red hair partially obscuring his face, he glared.

'How is it you have lived this long, Salamander, when my brother with all his gifts could not?'

He laughed again, but this time Numeon thought he heard regret.

'Vulkan will live again. I shall see to it.'

A hacking, mirthless chuckle escaped Magnus's lips.

'Such arrogance. Do you believe that fate or destiny has brought you this far? Did you think my brother had some power of the warp?' he asked, frowning with amusement. 'That you do?'

Now on his feet, Numeon refused to be cowed again.

'I have witnessed miracles.'

Magnus smiled, but the coldness of his lonely eye betrayed his intent.

'A beacon that brought saviours to your rescue?' he said. 'Stalling the murderous rampage of Xenut Sul? Enduring a baptism of flame? The blow that shattered that Cataphractii war-plate? Are these the miracles of which you speak, Artellus Numeon? Tell me, how many times is it that you have cheated death?'

'I–'

'You died on Traoris, and have been enslaved to my strings ever since. I have watched over you, Numeon.'

'Why? To what end?'

'Vulkan is my brother, is that not reason enough?'

'It makes no sense.'

'Nothing about this war does,' admitted Magnus, and there was melancholy in his voice. He looked away, as if searching inwardly. 'I had to see if I had it in me.'

'What?'

The primarch looked back at the drake.

'Compassion. Cruelty. I am torn between them in this bitter shell,' he uttered, as his rancour returned. 'And so I gave you strings and watched you flail upon

them. No miracles, only my power. My will.'

Numeon shook his head.

'That cannot be…'

It was a ruse, another cruel trick.

He backed away again, almost touching one of the frozen daemon forms still held in stasis by the Crimson King's chronomancy.

'It was Vulkan's will,' Numeon said, but sounded unconvinced.

'Was it?'

'I felt his strength within me. I am his vessel.'

'Are you?' Magnus's eye narrowed, as he closed the distance between them. 'Are you, really?'

'We only came to your attention because you are trapped inside the storm like us.'

'Did you? Am I?'

'This is a trial, of my resolve, my worthiness.'

'If that is what you believe…'

'You haven't been guiding us, or watching over me.'

'Have I not?'

Numeon's fists clenched, but he let go almost immediately. Something told him this was what Magnus wanted, for him to fall to anger. 'Either cease taunting me or kill me, but know that nothing you can say will convince me of any of this. I believe in Vulkan. He lives.'

'If he could be made to live again, what are you willing to sacrifice to bring about his return?'

'I would give up everything to reach Nocturne.'

'That isn't what I asked.'

Numeon was done bandying words. He sensed there were few left to trade anyway. He needed to end this, one way or another. 'Can you breach the storm and take us there or not?'

'No,' said Magnus, 'but I can give you a choice.'

'What choice?'

'The only one you have left. Look into the fire and find your path…'

Light flared, brighter and hotter than any sun. It burned, stripping away armour and flesh, rendering bone to ash until there was nothing left but dust on the wind. Numeon screamed as the agony took hold, his mind in turmoil, awash with fire. Endless fire.

'Behold!' boomed the voice of Magnus, filled with prophecy and arrogant

bombast. ‘It is your destiny, son of Earth!’

The fire roared, becoming more ferocious with every passing moment until it eclipsed all sound and there was silence again.

Numeon breathed, and in a single beat of his heart, everything changed.

Magnus had gone and in his absence came anarchy.

FORTY-NINE

Fragile alliance

Cruiser Monarchia*, the Altar*

Degat blinked and realised he was aboard the *Monarchia.*

He and several others, those who had survived the attack on the Salamanders vessel, stood dumbfounded within the arcane circle of the largest Altar.

One amongst them was crouched, head bowed.

Quor Gallek shook, and for a few moments Degat thought the Preacher convulsed in some warp palsy. Then he realised Quor Gallek was actually laughing.

'The Crimson King,' he hissed. 'He has come amongst them.'

Degat grabbed him roughly, hauling the Preacher to his feet.

'What of it? Why did you send us back?'

The battle anger was slow to fade, and he clenched and unclenched his open hand. The other clung to the still-turning chainblade, growling in irritation at being deprived of its feast.

He shut it down, releasing Quor Gallek at the same time.

'I had no choice, Degat. If we had stayed, he would have destroyed us.'

Degat knew little of Magnus the Red. Few had heard of the primarch since Prospero. Some believed he was dead.

'And what of our prey? Do we accede it to the Crimson King, after all we have pledged and suffered?'

He failed to mention that the escape was timely given the drake had him cold with a plasma weapon. Degat felt it in his wounded leg.

Quor Gallek had noticed the limp, looking down at the wound, but said nothing of it.

‘There is more,’ said Quor Gallek, and now he met Degat’s gaze. ‘Barthusa Narek is with them.’

‘Aboard the ship?’

‘He does not seem as he once did. But it was him, I am sure of it.’

Degat took a step back, as if readying for some ritual.

‘Send me back.’

‘I cannot.’

He advanced on Quor Gallek, his hand clenched around the Preacher’s throat.

‘I will have his head, preacher,’ he snarled. ‘Send me back.’

Quor Gallek repeated himself. ‘I cannot.’

Degat held on a little longer, debating whether or not to snap Quor Gallek’s neck. The ritual to span him and his warriors across the warp to the *Charybdis* had weakened the Preacher. It was the only reason Quor Gallek was being so pliant. He had no other choice.

‘You have led us to nothing.’

‘Not nothing…’ Quor Gallek croaked, holding up a tiny sliver of rock.

It was a piece of the fulgurite; it could be nothing other.

Degat let him go.

‘Did you kill him? The Lord of Drakes?’

Quor Gallek rubbed his neck, but then shook his head.

‘You can’t kill what is already dead.’

He held up the sliver to the light, which seemed to intensify around it.

‘With this fragment, we may be able to achieve something greater.’

‘What power can an insignificant piece of rock possibly hold?’ asked Degat, though he did reach for the fragment.

‘It turned Narek to a different purpose,’ Quor Gallek replied, and Degat snatched his hand away as if scalded.

He turned his back to the Preacher, nodding to his men to depart but be ready for immediate deployment. ‘Who is he then?’

‘A legionary in grey. A lost soul. He said the fulgurite showed him truth.’

‘Lorgar’s truth is all I care about,’ said Degat. ‘What is his purpose aboard that ship? Has he joined with them?’

‘It isn’t over, Degat. Not yet. Narek shall be yours and then answers will come. They will flow, as blood flows.’

The knuckles of Degat’s gauntlets cracked as he made two fists. ‘I will make him choke on it.’

‘Hold that truth close, brother, and everything we have just discussed,’ said

Quor Gallek, turning to face the servo-skull that had just hovered into the chamber. ‘We have guests…’

A hololith projected from the skull’s mouth, describing the war-like form of Laestygon.

‘*Another failure, preacher.*’

The *Reaper’s Shroud* must be close for hololithic communication to be possible. It had caught up to the *Monarchia* and no doubt had firing solutions prepared for immediate execution.

‘*The only reason your ship is not atoms right now is I need you, Quor Gallek.*’

Quor Gallek had the good sense to bow. Degat did nothing, but at least faced the Death Guard commander.

‘We will bring them to heel,’ he tried to assure Laestygon. ‘Their ship is on the brink of dissolution, their crew ravaged and warriors bloodied almost to the point of extinction. Now you are here, we can–’

Laestygon raised his gauntleted hand to stop Quor Gallek from talking.

‘*No more promises, no more lies, preacher. The ship is gone.*’

‘Gone? How? They are in the clutches of the storm. A ship cannot simply–’

‘*And yet the* Charybdis *shows on no augurs or sensorium I possess. They are gone. I need you to tell me where.*’ He leaned forwards, until his armoured face filled the image capture. ‘*But let me be clear. I hold no truck with your kind, you dabblers and daemon whisperers. You are a means to an end for me, Quor Gallek. When this is done, you and I shall part ways. Then you would be wise to flee. Run far.*’

FIFTY

Wrenched from the storm

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo hold*

Time had resumed without Numeon, who was suddenly thrust into darkness. Remembrances of what the Crimson King had showed him were swift to deteriorate. He grasped at them, trying to anchor whatever fragments he could to his waking mind, but it had all the effectiveness of holding on to smoke.

Rising storm.

Tides of fire.

Thunder on the air.

A burning path.

The mountain.

Klaxons wailed as the present reasserted itself, the screams of the Neverborn slow to fade from their warning echoes, and the deck ran red with the light of emergency lumens.

He was still in the cargo hold, not far from the sanctum when the *Charybdis* lurched hard to port. Flung off his feet, Numeon collided with the wall and hung on to the deck-grille with his fingers as the ship turned again.

Voices across the vox came alive in his ear, filtered through a comm-bead. Shouted orders and desperate announcements plagued the feed.

Every stanchion and rebar, every bulkhead and scrap of the *Charybdis'*s abused structure shrieked in torment.

Wrenched loose by the violent turbulence, a heavy packing crate slammed into Numeon's body and tore him off the deck. Gravity felt *wrong.* He was falling backwards along the corridor and away from the sanctum, as if he were plummeting down a shaft. He reached out for something to arrest his descent,

grimacing as more cargo came loose from its moorings and struck his shoulder. His grip on a section of racking came loose as a casket of munitions hit him in the chest.

Barrelling, in freefall, he fought to retain his bearings. Smashing against a jutting bulkhead, Numeon felt the air driven from his lungs. He clung on, his vision shaking with the vibratory throes of agony rippling through the ship.

He heard a wrenching of steel, metal tearing and splitting, and saw a girder hurling towards him like a flung spear. Having only just caught his breath, he rolled and felt gravity seize him.

Spinning, flailing, Numeon tried again to grasp something but he was caught in the swell of a tempest fashioned of crates and rebar, rushing down at him from the cargo hold. The girder had impaled itself in the bulkhead, splitting it and jutting out the other side menacingly.

More girders followed in its wake, ripped from their housings, the harbingers of a debris storm. Driven by the force of their momentum, the sharpened ends of the ragged girders would pierce Numeon's armour with ease.

He roared, in anger, in pain, railing at the ignominy of it. To die like this, after everything he had survived…

A sudden painful jerk arrested his descent, his shoulder flaring as it dislocated. The sudden halt hurled Numeon back against the wall, the girders arcing past a hand span from his face. He craned his neck to identify his saviour.

Kaspian Hecht looked as pained as Numeon felt, clinging to the Salamander's outstretched wrist.

'Are you just going to hang there? Come on!'

He heaved, and Numeon scrabbled with his other hand and feet, scrambling to reach the alcove where Hecht had taken refuge.

Hecht dragged Numeon inside. The grey legionary had his back against the inner wall, his feet braced against the opposite side, effectively wedging himself in.

It was tight, barely enough room for them both.

'Thank you,' Numeon said, gasping for breath. Blood ran down his face and shoulder. Some of his bones were fractured.

Hecht nodded, similarly ragged. He had his arm held across his chest, suggesting he had torn something, ligament or muscle, in the act of hauling Numeon to relative safety.

'What happened?' asked Numeon.

'I do not think… the storm wants to let us go.'

They had left the warp. Fallen or flung, Numeon didn't know yet. For a few seconds he had trouble determining if what he had seen was real or whether he had imagined the presence of the Crimson King.

Adopting the same posture as Hecht, Numeon pushed his dislocated shoulder back into its socket. The pain was momentary, and he could feel his transhuman biology already reknitting his wounded flesh.

Slowly, the trembling stopped as the *Charybdis* began to right itself, and the downward pressure against Numeon's chest ebbed. The cascade of dislodged cargo lessened in its ferocity. At first, the crates slid and tumbled until finally they stopped and came to rest.

The shrieking of the hull became a dull groan as battered armour plate settled and the taut inner skeleton of the ship relaxed.

As his feet came slowly back to the floor, Numeon felt no engine thrum through the deck or walls. They were adrift like before.

He exhaled a long, calming breath. 'I owe you my life, Hecht. What were you doing down here so close to the sanctum?' he asked, looking at the other legionary.

Hecht winced, evidently still feeling his injuries. He had lost his helm during the chaos and carried an ugly bruise on the side of his head.

'Must have got turned around,' he said. 'I was headed for the generatorium when everything… *changed.* It happened so suddenly. I confess, I'm having some trouble remembering exactly what took place.'

He turned to look Numeon in the eye.

'Unless you can enlighten me?'

Something about Hecht's expression gave Numeon pause, as if he already knew or had a strong inkling of what had transpired.

'A primarch intervened on our behalf. The Crimson King.'

Hecht could not disguise his shock or trepidation.

'Magnus the Red?'

'Or some part of him. I'm not sure. He was cryptic.'

'What did he say?'

'He imparted a vision, of a possible future, perhaps. I don't know. But he said we had a choice. I don't know what that meant, either.'

'There was nothing else? No bargain or pact?'

'Should there have been?'

He held Hecht's gaze a moment longer, trying to discern the grey legionary's meaning. All this time and still they had no inkling of the nature of his mission.

‘A gift given by any primarch usually comes with a price,’ he said. ‘The allegiance of the Thousand Sons is unknown.’

‘I do not think this was an act of declaration. I think he did it for Vulkan, a last gesture of fraternity in a time of common fratricide. Perhaps he just wanted to show that he could. How can I know the motives of the Crimson King? I am just relieved he didn’t kill all of us.’

Numeon shook his head, irritated at Hecht’s questioning, and activated the vox, trying to find a voice amongst the scraps of feed and squalling static.

He found Zytos.

‘*I am glad to hear your voice again, brother-captain,*’ said Zytos, warmly.

‘I am not so easy to kill, Zytos.’

‘*That you are not. Do you know what happened? The last thing I remember was heading back to the generatorium. We were surrounded by sirens, and then… this. Is Vulkan safe?*’

Numeon was already on the move. Whatever reprieve had been granted by Magnus the Red could not be counted upon. He also had no idea where they had emerged from the storm.

‘He is safe, and the sanctum remains undisturbed. I am with Hecht. We are coming to you. I’ll tell you everything then.’

‘*We are at the bridge. Numeon…*’

Whatever news Zytos was about to impart, it was important enough to give him pause. Numeon gestured for Hecht to stop.

‘Speak, Zytos. What is it?’

‘*Zonn is dead, and Gargo…*’ Numeon could hear the other Salamander shake his head. ‘*We are badly wounded, but that’s not all.*’

Numeon clenched a fist at word of the Techmarine’s death. So much loss. It had to mean something. The words of the Crimson King resounded in his mind. The falsehood of the miracles. The lie that Vulkan was guiding the Salamanders through him. The vision of fire. His fingers gently touched the sigil, but Numeon could feel no warmth coming off the fuller and drew no reassurance from its presence. Had Magnus been telling the truth?

His voice was weary with self-doubt. ‘What else, Zytos?’

‘*Head for the bridge,*’ he told him. ‘*We have left the storm, but you have to see this with your own eyes to believe it.*’

‘Believe what?’ he asked, unable to mask a flush of irritation. ‘Are we back within the borders of Ultramar?’

‘*Far from it, brother-captain. We have come through the other side of the*

storm.' Emotion choked Zytos's next words, as if he were scarcely able to believe them himself. '*Terra still stands, Artellus. The war is not yet over. The Emperor lives.*'

Numeon staggered. Whether it was his injuries, fatigue catching up with him or the sheer import of what he had just heard, he needed to brace himself against the wall to stop from falling. He waved off Hecht's offer of help as he tried to understand what Zytos had just told him.

'How? How can you know this?'

'*We have intercepted a message, repeated over and over,*' said Zytos. '*It is from Lord Dorn. He orders all loyal sons of the Emperor to return to the Imperial Palace.*'

A choice, Magnus had said. Numeon had no inkling it would be this. He cut the link and let dead air reign for a few seconds before regarding Hecht.

'We have returned.'

Hecht frowned. 'Nocturne?'

'No,' said Numeon, his words as heavy as his heart. 'Terra.'

FIFTY-ONE

Terra stands

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

Even with the ship's augurs set to maximum magnification, the edge of Terra's realm border was still a distant blur.

But they were here, through the storm and within touching distance of the Throneworld.

All sensoria told them without doubt or contradiction that they had reached the Segmentum Solar, and were only a few weeks' travel from the sovereign territory of the Emperor. Through the vagaries and madness of the warp, they had in fact travelled far beyond Nocturne, by any logical reckoning.

Numeon cut a lonely figure, standing before the fully wide iris of the ship's main oculus. Having returned to real space, the *Charybdis'*s shutters were up and the aperture before the Salamander commanded a wide and imposing view.

Enginseers had managed to restore motive function to the ship's plasma drives. By all accounts, the warp engines also remained functional, but they had no need of them now. A heading was struck with an ambivalent fusion of hope, despair and melancholy.

Adyssian had appeared to wear the worst of it. Now absent from his command throne, the shipmaster had looked a ragged and hollow figure as he left the bridge to Esenzi.

Circe lived, but she had been committed to the apothecarion under care of the vessel's medicae. The Navigator had regressed into a catatonic fugue state and had not uttered a single word since translation back into real space. Whatever horrors had been visited upon the crew and Adyssian, she had been subjected to also.

The bridge was all but barren, occupied by a skeleton crew scavenged from whoever was left. Barring Adyssian and Esenzi, the rest had been killed by the sirens. Despite the cleansing efforts of servitors, the deck was still stained red.

So many slain…

Numeon held the fuller but still found no comfort in its touch. He felt something, though, something worse than disappointment or anger and frustration. Relief.

It was over. At last. With Terra within reach, he could relent.

'Let's hear it again,' he said to Zytos, who was standing nearby with Dakar and Abidemi. Kaspian Hecht was the only other legionary on deck, having arrived with Numeon. Arms folded, he leaned against a bulkhead column, aloof and estranged from the others, as he had always been since coming aboard.

Zytos put a consoling hand on Numeon's shoulder.

'No one could have asked more of you, brother-captain.'

Numeon nodded, grateful but unreceptive.

'Shipwide, this time,' he said. 'Broadcast it across every vox. What's left of our company, legionaries and crew should know that Terra endures.'

After a few moments of static, the message relayed through every voxcaster on the *Charybdis*. From the barracks to the enginarium, every man and woman of the crew, every legionary stopped what they were doing.

In the apothecarion, where he helped minister to the likes of Gargo and the other wounded, Ushamann raised his head to listen.

At Circe's side, Adyssian gently clasped her hand in the hope that she would hear too.

Patrolling the corridors of the ship, making it secure and trying to atone for his previous failure, Xathen stopped and looked up at a crackling vox-unit nearby. His warriors did the same, lowering their weapons and taking heed.

Alone in the solitorium, Var'kir opened his eyes and paused in his meditations.

For a few moments, all ceased as the ship held its breath in rapt attention at the words of the Seventh Primarch.

'*Sons and daughters of the Emperor,*' intoned a deep, stentorian voice, laced with static and signal artefacting, '*Terra stands. Heed my words, the words of Rogal Dorn, Lord of the Imperial Fists and the Emperor's appointed Praetorian. Terra. Still. Stands. We endure, unbowed and defiant against the treachery of Horus. The Emperor beseeches you, return to the Throneworld. All loyal Legions must return to the Throneworld immediately.*

'*Terra stands*. Ave Imperator.'

The message ended there, but was being broadcast on a voxed and astropathic repeat from the Imperial Palace. Zytos cut the recording.

It was a call to arms. Horus must be headed to Terra. Dorn needed all loyal sons to stand up in its defence.

'Guilliman said it was over,' said Numeon. 'He was wrong. An entire Legion… nay, *three* Legions trapped on the other side of the storm, languishing in desperate ignorance.' He shook his head. 'If they knew…'

'If they knew, then every loyal son still on Macragge would leave Imperium Secundus and race to Terra,' said Zytos, finishing the thought. 'We can be the messengers, brother-captain. It has meaning. Purpose.'

'Once we reach Terra, there will be no return. Dorn won't allow it,' Numeon voiced his thoughts aloud. He turned to Esenzi, sitting on Adyssian's command throne. 'Can we hail them?'

'Whatever signal they are using is amplified many times over. I expect an entire astropathic choir has lent its voice to it. We would have to get much closer, my lord.'

Zytos sensed Numeon's unease as he returned his gaze to the vista of space encapsulated by the oculus. He was wise enough to keep his voice low, so only his intended recipient could hear.

'Are you considering *not* continuing on to Terra?'

'It feels like a turning point, doesn't it? A place where the path diverges. Along one fork lies Terra, along the other…'

'We have tried the other. It almost killed us.'

'I made an oath, brother,' said Numeon, clenching the sigil tighter.

'As did I, as did we all.' Zytos moved in closer, and Numeon hated how conspiratorial their voices sounded. 'But this is Terra. The Imperial Palace. Can we really turn our backs on it?'

Numeon looked him in the eye. All of his wounds, his trials had never felt so wearisome.

'And yet we turn our backs on Vulkan.' It wasn't an accusation; it was a genuine statement of fact. It was almost a request for permission.

Let it be over. Let it be done. Haven't I given enough?

Zytos was about to reply, but Numeon was already leaving.

'Brother-captain,' he sounded nonplussed, and spoke to Numeon's back, 'where are you going?'

'To the last vigil.'

FIFTY-TWO

The last vigil

Battle-barge Charybdis*, sanctum*

Not for the first time, but almost certainly the last, Numeon bowed his head in reverence in the close confines of the sanctum.

In defiance of reason, he had come here over and over again in search of the miraculous, looking for a sign to give him hope.

For a while, he thought he had found one but now all Numeon saw was the recumbent form of his dead father. At rest. Not in the earth of Nocturne, but safe at last.

At least on Terra, Vulkan would be reunited with his father.

'I have failed you, father, and for that I am deeply sorry.' His half-choked words came out in a solemn rasp, as if speaking them only made the reality of his failure more palpable.

'I have tried. I have. And I have suffered. We all have. But there is no way back to Nocturne, not while the storm rages and the galaxy burns.'

Vulkan did not answer. Nor did he stir. He remained, as he was, as he had ever been since embarking aboard the *Charybdis*. Lifeless. A cold corpse.

'I believed if we could return you to the mountain… that in the fires you would…'

He crushed his eyes closed, breathing deeply to marshal his resolve. Fragments of the vision returned, the Crimson King's prophecy.

Rising storm.

Tides of fire.

Thunder on the air.

A burning path.

The mountain.

Deathfire.

Look into the fire, Magnus had told him.

Numeon opened his eyes. He wanted to give in and accept that at least they were alive and had reached safe harbour. Vulkan would be interred in the funerary vaults of Terra and honoured across the ages.

But something gave him pause.

The epitaph on Vulkan's casket caught his eye.

'The Unbound Flame,' Numeon said aloud.

The fire.

Look into the fire.

'Who has seen the Unbound Flame?'

Find your path.

'A mountain looms above me, wreathed in mourning cloud…'

Numeon had thought Magnus meant *his* path, his destiny.

Rising urgently to his feet, he realised he had deciphered the Crimson King's words wrongly.

Ash had gathered at the base of Vulkan's casket, perhaps from a past vigil. Numeon touched his fingers to it and renewed the white sigil across his face. It meant resurrection.

'Vulkan lives,' he whispered, the tears of hope in his eyes, as he headed for the solitorium.

At the clack of booted feet, Var'kir looked up from his reverie before the burning brazier.

'Are their shadows within the flames, Chaplain?' asked Numeon, keeping his voice low in respect of the sanctuary.

'I see Zonn, Orhn, Ran'd, Zadar, Kur'ak… I see the dead, brother-captain.'

'But never our father, never Vulkan,' said Numeon, kneeling down beside Var'kir.

'No, never Vulkan.' He met Numeon's gaze in a gesture of sincerity. 'I know we have not seen eye to eye on much regarding our father. I wish I could have believed as you did that he could be resurrected, but a swath of ash across your face cannot manifest miracles.'

'We live. That is a miracle.'

Var'kir nodded, returning to the flame. 'Indeed, some of us.'

'There is no one aboard this ship who feels their loss more than I. I am

responsible for their deaths.' His mind wandered briefly as he remembered them.

A hand on his shoulder lifted Numeon from his dark reverie.

'It is a great blow that we failed to reach Nocturne. But at least on Terra we can rejoin this war.'

'Your faith does you credit, Var'kir. It always has. But we didn't fail – *I* did. Vulkan still lies in state because I could not get us through the storm.'

'We *will* go back, Artellus. When the war is over, and Horus's rebellion crushed, Vulkan shall be laid to rest.'

'I know we will, but it is not I who will lead us. It's you.'

Var'kir turned sharply. He frowned, not understanding.

'To where, Numeon?'

'Nocturne.'

Slowly shaking his head, Var'kir began to rise. 'I see you are still deluded. I had hoped that–'

The gauntleted hand seizing his wrist stopped Var'kir from finishing.

He first looked at it and then Numeon.

'Unhand me, Artellus,' he said calmly but firmly. 'This self-destructive dream has gone on long enough. The dead in our crematoria are testament to it!'

'*Look,*' Numeon urged, holding the Chaplain fast as he gestured to the brazier. 'Look into the flame, Var'kir.'

'I have done so countless times. There is nothing. Only fire.' He looked down at his wrist again. 'Now release me, brother,' he said behind a barrier of clenched teeth. 'I can no longer be a party to this madness.'

'You saw the Unbound Flame.'

Seeing he had the Chaplain's attention, he let him go.

'That proves nothing. I beheld a flame, an endless fire that raged eternal. I saw the immolus*,* "that which devours all",' he said, quoting from the Promethean creed. 'An ending to all things.'

'And from that flame, Chaplain? What does the creed tell us?'

'From every end there is rebirth, the Circle of Fire. It does not mean Vulkan will return. It could have a hundred other interpretations.'

'Have you considered you could not see Vulkan, because you were seeing something else? Because you were *meant* to see something else?'

'Speak plainly, brother, or I will leave and recommend you are relieved of command.'

'The endless fire that devours all things,' said Numeon, 'is Deathfire, the mountain of Nocturne, the rage eternal. *It* is the immolus, Chaplain. *That* is what

you saw.’

For a moment, Var’kir’s conviction wavered, and he frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Look again,’ asked Numeon. ‘Before we hurl our bodies and our souls back into the storm, look into the fire,’ he said, and heard the words of Magnus echoed back at him.

Var’kir knelt back down. He looked into the fire.

FIFTY-THREE

The gathering of the Pyre

Battle-barge Charybdis*, Igneum*

Zytos had mustered the Legion in the relic hall.

‘All are gathered, Numeon,’ he said, meeting his captain at the threshold. Beyond, a flame burned in the darkness of the Igneum. Its crackling embers disturbed the quiet. Long, flickering shadows reached over to the empty table where the sons of Vulkan had last gathered. This time they were standing by a large burning brazier.

As Numeon approached, he saw how few they had become. Their haggard faces and battered helms lit by the fire, a tight arc of wounded Salamanders. Ash gathered at their feet, drifting like dust motes from the slatted basin of the brazier pan.

Taking his place amongst the others, Numeon reached into a cauldron and fed the blaze with a fistful of black coal.

‘So we are gathered, so we must decide our fate.’

He looked to the others, trying to gauge their mood. Fewer than half of those who had left Macragge now stood. A heavy toll.

‘I do not see a brotherhood defeated,’ he told them, briefly meeting the eye of Var’kir, who gave a shallow nod. ‘I see resolve still.’

The Chaplain was almost shoulder to shoulder with Xathen, who looked the least scathed but somehow the most disillusioned. By contrast, Gargo hung on Numeon’s every word. Even the loss of his remaining flesh-and-blood arm had not diminished his belief.

‘Feed the flame of our retribution,’ said Numeon, inviting them all to fuel the burning brazier, ‘and see our purpose restored.’

One by one, the Salamanders took up a handful of black coal and fed the fire. They did so solemnly and in silence.

All except Xathen. His enemy had escaped him, the one who had killed their Techmarine and brutalised Gargo. Ripped away like smoke before the wind, as whatever foul rite enabled the Word Bearers to simply step aboard the *Charybdis* expired or was broken. It burned, as did every indignity their former battle-brothers turned renegades had inflicted on them. His mood therefore was particularly sour when he challenged Numeon.

'What is the meaning of this?' he asked, lingering before the brazier, the firelight casting dagger-like shadows across his face and armour. 'Whose fate are we to decide?'

Ushamann's gaze gave off a faint cerulean glow, notable in the sea of fiery eyes now focused on the Pyre captain.

Numeon cursed the Librarian under his breath for the mild betrayal.

'He means for us to abandon our course,' Ushamann told them. 'You want us to descend back into the Ruinstorm.'

A look of confused disbelief crept over Xathen's face. It was mirrored in several others.

'Is this true?'

'Yes,' said Numeon. 'Nocturne is where we are meant to be. For Vulkan.'

'For Vulkan? Our father is dead,' said Xathen. 'I would see him put to rest as much as anyone on this ship, but it's over. You must see that. Var'kir, you know this.'

The Chaplain nodded.

'I do see, and don't disagree, Rek'or. I believe as you do, but I have looked into the flame and have seen a path.'

'A route through the storm?' asked Gargo.

Xathen frowned. 'What path? What do you see, Var'kir? As one of the Igniax, what vision does the flame grant you?'

'A path to Nocturne.'

Xathen slowly shook his head, as if unable to conceive of what he was hearing.

'What is this, if not madness?'

He stepped away from the flame.

Numeon closed the distance between them, and seized Xathen's arm before he could turn. He did it with such violence that several Salamanders looked around at their brothers, unsure what was happening or whether to intervene.

Mu'garna and Baduk went to get involved on their sergeant's behalf, until a

look from Zytos stopped them.

He swung around his hammer so the shaft was held across his body. No gatekeeper or warden had ever looked so severe.

'Remember your oaths,' he warned them. 'We all swore to follow Numeon as our master. Whatever the cost, wherever it would take us.'

Sensibly, both Pyroclasts backed down.

'It has to be all of us, brother,' said Numeon. During the brief disruption, his eye had never left Xathen.

Xathen met his captain's gaze then looked down at the hand upon his arm until it was released.

'I would welcome death,' he said. 'A *worthy* death, but not as a victim of the storm we barely just survived. Not at the mercy of our enemies. Death Guard, Word Bearers, hellspawn that look like children for Throne's sake! It ends in ignominy, and Vulkan lost to whatever lurks beyond the veil. If we go back, we will be defenceless. What if our venerable ship gives out at last? Our Techmarine's headless corpse now lies in our ship's morgue, alongside the bodies of the brothers *I* killed.' He snarled, fighting back his grief and his anger. 'Zadar, Kur'ak – their blood is against my soul. How? How can this even be done?'

'Belief,' said Numeon, proffering a handful of coal. 'But only if we are united. The storm smothers all light. We have no guide from the Astronomican, that is true. But if we can burn through the darkness, hoist a light of our own to our mast, then we will see what lies beyond. Deathfire will become our beacon. We have but to see it.'

'You will get us through the storm through *hope?*' Xathen still sounded incredulous. He turned to the others. 'Does anyone else hear this insanity?'

'Be careful,' Zytos warned him.

Numeon raised his hand for calm.

'It doesn't make sense, but then nor does the warp. It is distilled emotion run rampant. Our own shipmaster's grief was used against us. Our desire to see Vulkan restored. Can you tell me you did not experience something similar?'

Xathen's expression darkening told Numeon he couldn't.

'I have seen the dead, slain without glory, without a fighting chance, Numeon! How can you ask us to submit to that again? I am sick of being at the mercy of my enemy's blade. For once, I want to be the one who decides my own fate, on a battlefield of my choosing with my enemy in front of me. No more deceit, no more treachery.'

Murmurings of approval met Xathen's words. The Legion had skirted self-destruction once, they had no desire to do so again.

But Xathen wasn't finished.

'Should we do this, and return to the storm. Even if we survive…' He glanced to the Chaplain. 'Var'kir is no Navigator. Even if he can see a way through the veil to Nocturne, how will he guide the ship?'

'He won't,' Ushamann replied. 'I will. And Circe, if she lives.'

'No Navigator can breach this storm, Xathen,' said Var'kir. 'It has been tried, and our endeavours found wanting. We must embrace the old ways, those which Vulkan taught us. In doing so we step back from enlightenment, abandoning the principles of the Imperial Truth. Know I do not say this lightly, but I am certain it is the only way to reach Nocturne.'

'You realise, this is insane,' said Xathen.

'You named the dead, brother,' Numeon replied. 'What meaning has their sacrifice if we are to abandon our oaths to each other and to Vulkan? Since when have Salamanders ever taken the easy course?'

'This is certain death, Numeon.'

'Perhaps, but I don't think so. Hope, our belief in one another and in Vulkan is all we have to gird ourselves from these terrors,' Numeon told them, and brandished the sigil. 'This hammer brought me back to my Legion. It has saved my life on more than one occasion. But it is just a hammer, a simple fuller, a piece of our primarch's armour. I stand before you not as your captain, or a prophet. I am a Salamander, a son of Vulkan, and I can hear the fires of the mountain calling me home. Through all of this, every trial we have endured, every brother and ally we have lost, I have believed it was for a greater purpose. *This* is the purpose. Deathfire is calling its adopted son back. It alone has the power to restore him to us. Tell me… *brothers*... what trial cannot be overcome, what risk is not worth taking for that?'

Silence fell, interrupted only by the crackling of the flame.

Gargo was the first to kneel. He did so to reach the ash gathering at their feet. Slowly, and with careful deliberation, he daubed the sigil of resurrection across his face. When he was finished, he stood with the fire of belief in his eyes. Not a religious fervour, but rather a form of conviction and profound sense of brotherhood. Igen Gargo, the black-smiter who had lost his gift of craft, he who stood mauled before his fellow Salamanders… If he could still have hope, then what right did any of the others have to doubt?

Var'kir came next, then Abidemi and Dakar.

Then Zytos, until every Salamander barring two had anointed their skin with the ash of belief.

Numeon's gaze had not left Xathen's throughout the ritual.

'You declaimed me your captain once. You hailed my name. You trusted me then, Xathen. Trust me again now. This is not ritual suicide, it is hope. The last that remains. But it must be all of us, brother. What say you?'

Xathen took the coal, and threw it into the flames. He scribed the ash as the others had.

Then he left, breaking the circle and pausing only when Gargo clapped his bionic hand on his shoulder.

'Release me, Igen,' Xathen murmured.

'Let him go,' said Numeon, though his expression was severe as he too daubed the ash.

Gargo stepped aside and Xathen left the Igneum to the lonely sound of his booted feet striking the floor beneath.

'His wounds are too deep,' said Gargo, trying to explain on his brother's behalf.

'We are all wounded, Gargo,' Numeon told him. 'Xathen will come around. He must.' He looked to the others, nodding with slight belligerence. 'So, we return to the storm and stare ruin in the eye.'

No one cheered, no one shouted Vulkan's name. But there was resolve and determination.

Here then, the Salamanders had decided their path.

Only one thing was certain. It led to fire and death.

FIFTY-FOUR

The need for sacrifice

Battle-barge Charybdis*, apothecarion*

Adyssian was kneeling by Circe's side as she slept fitfully on one of the apothecarion medi-slabs.

His bowed head touched his fingers, his hands clasped to hers as he murmured passages from the *Lectitio Divinitatus*.

The air was cool and sanitised. A low hum emanated off the atmosphere recyclers and the dim halogen strip lights glowing overhead. Circe had looked troubled, but at least her eyes were now closed after a period of catatonia had seized her. Ushamann had calmed her mind, and she had slipped into dreams.

Adyssian hoped she would never wake, that her pain would ease and she would be embraced at the Emperor's side. At least here, like this, she could have some measure of peace.

The ship and its crew had seen enough, endured enough. What fate awaited them all, including the refugees from Rampart, if they followed the Salamanders into fire? Oblivion, most likely.

The telltale pressure hiss of the apothecarion door opening roused Adyssian from his prayers. Wiping his face on his uniform sleeve, he turned to see Ushamann, Zytos and Numeon.

'No,' he said, standing up and vigorously shaking his head. 'No, damn you!' Adyssian put his body between Circe and the Salamanders.

Ushamann raised his hand to urge the shipmaster aside, but Numeon stopped him.

'We need her, Kolo,' he said simply. 'Ushamann can bring her around, but then we need her.'

‘I have heard,’ said Adyssian. ‘You want to go back into the Ruinstorm.’

‘And we need her,’ Numeon insisted gently.

Adyssian scowled, angry, prematurely grieving. ‘It will kill her.’

Numeon nodded. ‘I know, but her life was given over to the service of the Legion the moment she was born, shipmaster. As was yours.’

Cold, thin fingers touched Adyssian’s hand and he turned sharply.

Circe, enfeebled, dying but awake, looked back at him. There was compassion and love in her eyes for the man with whom she had brought life into the world. A life not destined to last, but which had touched them both nonetheless.

‘Did you do this?’ he asked of Ushamann, his eyes bright with fury.

‘No,’ replied the Librarian. ‘I swear I did not enter her mind. She has risen by herself.’

Adyssian looked back at Circe, fear, hope and confusion warring on his face. ‘You do not have to do this.’

Though she wasn’t strong, she had never been strong, Circe clenched Adyssian’s hand as tightly as she could. Her voice was not much more than a whisper.

‘But I choose to, Kolo. My love.’

And her gaze slipped beyond Adyssian for a moment to Numeon, who gave a single, shallow nod of thanks.

She put her hands on Adyssian’s face, using her thumbs to wipe at the fresh tears that trickled down it.

‘I would not have reached Terra, anyway. There was nothing for us there.’

And Adyssian replied in a small, wounded voice. ‘I know…’

‘It will be soon, shipmaster,’ said Numeon, his tone brooking no argument. ‘You have an hour and then we must be ready. Your place is upon the bridge, Circe’s in the novatum.’

Adyssian nodded. His bearing was that of a condemned man going to the gallows.

Outside, the three Salamanders gathered for a moment, having left Adyssian and Circe alone.

‘Is there a chance she could survive this?’ Numeon asked, looking through the glass at the two mortals sharing their last moments with one another.

‘No, captain. She will die,’ said Ushamann, his mien as cold as ever. ‘It is the only thing I am certain of with this entire endeavour. The only question that remains is whether she will live long enough for us to reach Nocturne.’

‘So be it,’ said Numeon, knowing they had no choice now and turning away so he could focus his mind on what was needed next.

‘Ensure Var’kir is prepared,’ he told Ushamann.

‘I shall mark a place for him upon the bridge.’

He left, leaving Zytos and Numeon alone.

‘Have you seen Hecht?’

Zytos shook his head. ‘Not since we escaped the storm. Do you want me to find him?’

‘No, he could be anywhere. It is strange though.’

‘How so?’

‘Allegedly, he is an agent of Malcador, the Emperor’s own regent. Here we are, in the vicinity of Terra, about to abandon our duty to Rogal Dorn himself and Hecht is absent.’

‘You expected him to stand in our way?’ asked Zytos.

Numeon nodded.

‘Are you sure he still won’t?’

‘This is *our* business, not Malcador’s. The Emperor would want His son restored. He needs Vulkan, just as we do. Besides, there is something about Hecht. It’s as if I am seeing it for the first time.’

‘He has bled with us.’

‘But is that any guarantee of loyalty, especially to a cause not his own?’

Zytos had to admit the answer to that was no.

‘Can we trust him?’

‘As far as anything we have encountered in the storm.’

Numeon paused to consider his next course of action. There was no time to look for the grey legionary. Perhaps he had his own rituals to observe.

Zytos saw his captain’s dilemma. ‘What would you ask of me? Name it, and it shall be done. I can take a squad, track Hecht down.’

‘No, let him be. He has been an ally to us so far. I’ll need you on the bridge. Every legionary must be placed in the defence of it and the generatorium. And since we are now so few…’

Numeon briefly looked away, his thoughts on the dead. In his heart, he knew the need for sacrifice wasn’t satisfied. Not yet.

Zytos lifted his spirits. ‘For what it’s worth, brother, I would follow you into helfyre. I already have done once, and I would do so again, if you asked it of me.’

‘I ask, brother,’ said Numeon, smiling as he clapped Zytos on the shoulder. ‘I

ask all of you. I only wish it were helfyre we were stepping into. This is much worse.’

FIFTY-FIVE

Our path through the flame

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

Darkness prevailed across the bridge, alleviated slightly by the low red light of lumens.

With most of the bridge crew dead, it was sparsely occupied.

Lieutenant Esenzi stood at the helm, waiting for Adyssian's order. The shipmaster had returned to his throne, but was a brooding presence behind her on the command dais. Circe had taken her place in the novatum in the cloistered vaults above the bridge, and all knew what that meant. This was to be her last journey.

Petty officers and scavenged servitors attended the *Charybdis'*s other essential systems. They would not need to do much. As soon as they had translated back into the warp and the storm, faith would have to do the rest.

Var'kir was the focus of that faith. He cut a lonely figure, even amongst his Salamanders brothers. Several armoured silhouettes stood at readiness around the bridge. Two held the entranceway, the blast door firmly sealed behind Dakar and Abidemi, and the rest were stationed in the deck that sat below the command throne.

There was not a warrior amongst them who did not have a hand on the pommel of his sword, or hold his bolter braced across his chest.

'Approaching Mandeville point,' said Esenzi, the sound of her voice breaking up the monotonous refrain of the ship's active consoles.

'Gargo,' Numeon uttered through the Legion vox-feed to summon the black-smiter. 'Brace for warp translation.'

'*Generatorium is secure. All is in readiness,*' the black-smiter replied. He had

taken what remained of Zonn's combat servitors and enginseers, and raised a defensive cordon in the lower decks. He did so to honour the Techmarine and in some way atone for his death.

Both Mu'garna and Baduk joined him, but there had been no sign of their sergeant. Since he had absented himself from the Igneum, Rek'or Xathen's movements were unknown.

Numeon relayed that he understood and turned to Var'kir.

'Brother Chaplain,' he said, 'we are in your hands now.'

Var'kir nodded. He clasped his crozius in both hands, holding it before his skull mask like an icon. A flare of energy rippled down the haft and across the head. He used it to ignite the brazier that had been set before him.

Flames surged violently into life, their crackling embers lighting up the bridge. Shadows crept along the walls and the scent of burning filled the air.

On the deck, where Var'kir was kneeling, Ushamann had placed a circle of warding and communion.

The Librarian was also kneeling, also surrounded by sigils of the arcane, his circle entwined with that of Var'kir but behind the Chaplain.

'Circe,' said Ushamann, his voice already resonant with power and an eldritch, cerulean glow emanating from his eyes.

'*I am here*.'

'Steel yourself. Find my mind and follow it to Var'kir's. There will be pain, sister.'

'*I am not afraid of pain.*'

Ushamann smiled.

'You are as fearless as any legionary I have known.'

The blaze took hold and rose into a pillar of flame. Numeon looked into it, but could not see what Var'kir beheld. Within somewhere was Nocturne, a path through the fire. A beacon. They had but to burn through the darkness and reach it.

If asked, he could not explain it. He had no answer to Xathen's declamations of madness. It was the will of Vulkan, a tempering of body, mind and spirit that Numeon alone had to endure in order to inspire others. In the few seconds that remained before translation, he remembered the dead and vowed that their sacrifices would have meaning. From the very beginning of the war, after the bombs had begun to fall and the bonds of brotherhood were forever shattered, their father had been lost to them. They were a much diminished Legion, if not in pride then in number. Vulkan would give them purpose again, not as the

political tools of the Avenging Son or the willing partners of the Iron Tenth in grief-stricken self-annihilation, but as the Drakes. As they were meant to be.

If the Salamanders were to survive, then so must Vulkan.

Numeon pulled *Draukoros* from its scabbard with a low scrape of metal against drake hide, feeling the weight of the moment. His path had never been clearer. Terra was gone, behind them now.

He held his blade aloft for all to see, and the red light caught viscerally on the fanged blade.

'Know this, sons and daughters of Nocturne. Vulkan is with us. All our suffering, our loss and pain have been about this moment. Hold firm to the mast, lash your courage to it with bonds of brotherhood and belief, and we shall see our faith rewarded. No darkness can smother all light. A flame, however small, shall always endure. Let it not be extinguished. *Believe*... and we shall prevail.'

Across from him, Zytos swung his hammer from off his back and planted it pommel first in front of him, holding on two-handed.

'Brothers,' he intoned.

Every Salamander on deck unsheathed his sword if he had one. Racked bolter slides sounded in a cacophony of clacking metal.

'Rendezvous with Mandeville point imminent, shipmaster,' said Esenzi.

Adyssian did not reply. He sat hunched upon his throne, chin rested on a clenched fist. His eyes were on Var'kir as he stared into the flame.

'At your order, Lord Chaplain,' he said, as hollow as any man about to lose everything. 'And may the Emperor protect all our souls.'

'Vulkan lives…' said Numeon, and heard his words echoed solemnly by each of his brothers in unison.

'Vulkan lives.'

The fire roared, so loud it almost drowned out Var'kir's command.

'Now,' he said.

And the *Charybdis* plunged back into the Ruinstorm.

It happened so suddenly that Quor Gallek almost missed it.

The Preacher was kneeling at one of the Altars, enrobed and no longer wearing his battleplate. He had come here to gather his strength but also to search. The sliver of fulgurite in his hand burned, and as he allowed it to lie flat upon his searing flesh, he saw it turn like a compass needle.

He spoke in an awestruck whisper. 'Miraculous…'

Quor Gallek knew much of the empyrean tides, but the warp was still an ocean,

one that two ships might sail forever and never find one another. But his lodestone had shown him what he needed, better than any humble augur or sensorium.

He activated the vox.

'Degat, summon your warriors. I believe I have what we seek. A thread that will lead us to them.'

The Word Bearer's locator rune placed him in the *Monarchia*'s apothecarion, but he signalled an affirmative.

Quor Gallek smiled thinly as he eyed the floating servo-skull that had not left him since their return to the ship several hours ago. All that time he had plied the warp tides, aimlessly seeking. But for the sliver he might have missed the *Charybdis.*

He blinked once to engage the hololith. Light coursed from the servo-skull's eye sockets, bathing Quor Gallek's genuflecting form and hailing the *Reaper's Shroud* at the same time.

After a few moments, the mouth of the skull clacked open and Laestygon's image was projected in grainy monochrome.

'*Speak, preacher.*'

'I have found them.'

An ugly smile split the Death Guard's rad-scarred lips, vile even across the hololith.

'*Then they have reached their end. Do your part now, preacher, and I will honour our agreement. Fail again, and your suffering will be profound. I will a send ship for you. Be ready for it.*'

'A ship?' asked Quor Gallek, trying to fight down a sudden sense of unease rising in his gut. 'What for?'

'*I want you aboard the* Reaper's Shroud *whilst you are still useful. I may have to sacrifice your vessel to stop them. Be ready.*'

Laestygon cut the feed, returning the servo-skull to its macabre state of un-life.

Regardless of what the Death Guard wanted, Quor Gallek knew he had to stop the *Charybdis* whilst it was still in the warp. If nothing else, his ship and a ready means of escaping the Death Guard depended on it. He suspected Magnus's hand in the Salamanders' salvation, but not one to see a gift so casually scorned, the primarch would not help them again. 'You believe you can breach the veil…' he said to himself.

Why else would the Drakes have returned if they did not harbour some realistic hope of success? Somehow, they had found a way to see through the aetheric

tides without the Astronomican.

During the assault on the generatorium, as he had come aboard, Quor Gallek had felt the mind of another psyker. With the fulgurite sliver psychically tethered to its point of origin, he could find that mind again. Entering the Ruinstorm a second time, it had to be weak. Vulnerable.

A mind wandering in dark places always was.

'Old friend,' he muttered as he drew forth the Asirnoth blade. 'I have need of you.'

He had to move fast. The ship Laestygon had sent for him would not be long.

It would take pain. And blood. It always did.

Quor Gallek gently pulled open his robes, exposing the bare skin of his chest. Scars heaped atop scars, not all battle wounds.

Murmuring the rites of the sacred Octed, he began to carve.

FIFTY-SIX

Blinded

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

The *Charybdis* had entered through the Mandeville point and been struck at once by the Ruinstorm's ferocity. The familiar shriek of the ship's abused hull and skeletal structure resounded throughout the decks.

On the bridge, it was akin to a death wail.

The mortal crew clung to their posts, teeth gritted as they stared at the shuttered viewport, doubtless wondering what horrors they were sailing through.

For weeks, it had been this way. A torturous journey, seemingly without end.

The Salamanders remained stalwart throughout. Vigilant, redoubtable and watching keenly for the slightest sign of weakness.

Numeon watched too, for days on end, but had not expected it to come from the Librarian.

Under the strain of maintaining a heading through the storm for so long, Ushamann trembled. His eyes had clenched tightly shut, and the beads of feverish sweat on his face glistened redly in the light. Like blood.

Var'kir, who clung to his crozius with a near-desperate fervour, shared his pain. He too shook, head bowed as he murmured in the old tongue, that which had been spoken by the earth shamans of ancient Nocturne.

Numeon caught only fragments of words, and even these he did not understand. Few now did who still lived.

Vulkan was one, but he would rise again. He *must.*

Between both Chaplain and Librarian, and their obvious struggle, it took Numeon a few moments to realise something else was wrong with Ushamann.

'Zytos…' Numeon swung his sword up into a ready stance and had begun to

advance on Ushamann when he called out.

Seeing the danger, knowing what it meant first-hand from his brief experience in the Eastern Keep, Zytos came at the afflicted Librarian from the other side.

Before either could reach him, Ushamann's head yanked back as if pulled by a cable and his eyes sprang open, spilling out cerulean light.

'Vulkan's blood, Ushamann,' whispered Numeon, raising his sword to cut off the Librarian's head. 'I am sorry.'

'*Not... me...*' he rasped, the effort of speaking etched in agony on his face.

Too late, Zytos turned to see the doors to the novatum already opening as if no lock or bar had been placed upon them.

Standing in the gaping portal, limned by the red light and partially obscured by the pressure venting from the seals, was Circe.

Adyssian had turned also, and was drawn from the command throne by a siren song he alone could respond to.

Her lithe body no longer appeared frail, as she almost glided down the stairway from her sanctum.

'Shipmaster,' Numeon warned and went to intercede.

Circe held out her hands, as if surrendering.

'Navigator…' said Numeon, one hand on the grip of *Basilysk.*

Then Circe looked up, and he knew then that she was lost. Her black eyes were like pools of oil. She smiled, reaching up to remove her silver circlet.

Several other Salamanders had already taken aim but Adyssian had mounted the stairs and strayed into their path, putting himself between Circe and the warriors charged with destroying her. The poor shipmaster didn't know she was already dead, or if he did, he chose to ignore it.

'Stand aside, shipmaster. That is not Circe,' said Numeon.

'I know,' Adyssian replied sadly, and fell into her embrace anyway.

Her fingers had begun to taper at the ends, hardening into long talons.

'My love…' she said, two voices speaking as one. She sounded amused, and took off the circlet. Numeon remembered that tone as he was forced to look away.

Xenut Sul.

And as Circe stared down at Adyssian with the fathomless black orbs of the Unburdened and the churning madness of her warp eye, she saw something in his face that gave her pause.

'You are not my love,' he told the foul thing wearing Circe's borrowed flesh, and revealed the explosive charge he had clasped in both hands like a promise.

Numeon saw it too in his peripheral vision, and as Adyssian clung to the frail form of his dead love and carried them both through the open seal into the novatum, he shouted.

'Take cover!'

Adyssian and Circe were torn apart. Pressed tight to their bodies, the destructive force was magnified and shredded them with its sheer intensity.

A plume of smoke, fire and shrapnel from ruptured sections of deck and interior billowed down into the bridge. Though most of its incendiary power vented into the novatum, it spilled over.

Several crewmen and legionaries, Numeon amongst them, were hurled off their feet.

It would have killed Esenzi but for Numeon shielding her. He curved over her body, arms cradling the lieutenant, his armour torn by many rents. She reached up and touched the sigil on his face, relieved to be alive.

Abidemi had been thrown to the opposite side of the deck, but groaned as he slowly got up. He managed to crawl over to Dakar, who had a large piece of shrapnel embedded in his chest. Numeon raised his eyes to Abidemi in hope, but the other Salamander shook his head.

'How many more must die?' Zytos asked. His armour was scored and blackened too. Every legionary who stood on the bridge had put himself in harm's way to protect the mortals in his charge.

As a result casualties were light.

Numeon turned, and was about to answer when Ushamann screamed. He did so in concert with Var'kir. Wrenching off his skull mask, the Chaplain's eyes blazed with the captured fires of an inferno as at last he beheld the beacon they had been seeking.

'I see it!' Var'kir roared, for he could do nothing else. 'The flame… immolus… Deathfire!'

As they breached the storm, a rush of intense revelation flowed through Numeon. He saw the vision Magnus had given him anew. He saw his passage to the mountain, the blood-red sky overhead cracked by forks of lightning. He knew this. It was the Time of Trial, when the earth split and the heartblood of Nocturne poured forth to consume all.

Ushamann kept on screaming. With Circe dead, her possessed form so abruptly vanquished, it fell to him to take the strain alone. The Librarian appeared to shrivel, as the warp stole away his vitality and power. Flesh withered and aged in seconds; rapid atrophy reduced his skeleton to brittle, ossified bones.

He smiled, despite the agony, as his eyes hollowed to pitted sockets until only the light remained.

Before the teeth in his mouth cracked into powder, before his tongue shrank to withered meat, Ushamann was able to utter one final word.

'Nocturne…'

The light from Var'kir's eyes spilled out until it filled the bridge, so bright that none could endure it, not even Numeon. It banished all darkness, burning, ever burning, until with his last act Ushamann wrenched them from the storm, bringing the *Charybdis'*s long journey to its end.

PART THREE
NOCTURNE

FIFTY-SEVEN

Nocturne

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

Stillness stole across the bridge of the *Charybdis,* gently urged by its plasma engines, the hull finally at rest.

The light faded and the dark reasserted itself.

Ushamann was no more. In his circle there remained a pile of ash. No bone, no flesh, not even the ceramite of his armour. He was simply gone.

Var'kir lay on his side, barely conscious but alive. As Numeon went over to him, the shutters over the viewport began to lift.

The blessed void existed beyond them, and a vista that swelled the heart of every Salamander who saw it.

A blood-red orb, tumultuous, the pluming smoke of its mountains visible even from space.

Nocturne.

'We are home, Var'kir,' said Numeon, emotion choking his voice. 'We are home. Look…'

But as Numeon cradled the Chaplain's head so he too could see the wonder that they had achieved together, he realised Var'kir would never see it. Never again. His eyes were gone, two blackened pits left in their wake.

'It's all right, Artellus,' he said, still weak but getting stronger. He clasped the back of Numeon's hand. 'I can feel it. Our return. Our belief…' Trying to turn his head, he asked, 'Ushamann?'

'Our Librarian has made his final sacrifice,' said Numeon, sadly.

Zytos sank to his knees. So did several Salamanders. Despite the evidence of their eyes, few could believe they had reached Nocturne.

Their relief did not last long.

Through the wide aperture of the oculus, a second warp translation manifested. Far off to the port side, reality was breached as the void itself distorted like a rippling pool of abject darkness. Something tore through, tendrils of psychic corposant clinging to its bows as if reticent to let it go.

At first a long prow, crested by a pitted trident. Then a ship's flanks, rough-hewn by war, blackened and battle-scarred. A dirty white hull, edged in green and tarnished copper, emerged. Begrimed and pockmarked, its bloated mass bulged with weapon arrays. Slowly, with a tranquillity that brought to mind a great leviathan moving through the deeps, the immense vessel fully translated into real space. Larger even than the *Charybdis,* it spoke of war unending and a vicious pathology to hunt down its prey.

A Barbaran symbol emblazoned its flank, the spiked crown encircling a jawless skull.

Death Guard.

And it was not alone.

A second, much smaller ship came in its warp wake, trailing aetheric mist as it too emerged from the haunted darkness of the Ruinstorm.

Hell-red, its statued crenellations, cathedrals and arcane buttresses had less in common with a battleship than they did a temple. War had been eschewed for worship, though it came armed for a fight nonetheless.

The *Monarchia* – the *Charybdis'*s augurs knew this vessel already.

'Shipmistress,' said Numeon, gently laying Var'kir down before getting to his feet. His eyes never left the viewport as the two enemy ships came fully into being and he saw the gaping maw in the void clamped shut behind them.

It took Esenzi a few moments to realise Numeon was addressing her.

'My lord.'

'You are in command of this ship now. I need to know how long before we are in effective weapons range of those two vessels, and what kind of fight we can put up in return.'

To her credit, Esenzi left the helm to an ensign and took up Adyssian's old seat. Blood and black scorching still lingered where the shipmaster had given his life for his crew, but she averted her eyes from it when it came into her peripheral vision.

After sounding a general alert, she quickly relayed orders to her makeshift bridge crew. Sensoria were activated, data gathered, damage reports inloaded and void shields engaged.

The prognosis was bleak.

'The *Reaper's Shroud* and the *Monarchia,* my lord,' said Esenzi, rapidly scrolling through the data screed. 'Fourteenth and Seventeenth Legion respectively. Sensors are detecting energy signatures from the laser batteries of both ships. They are primed to fire, my lord.'

'And our readiness?'

'Our forward void shields are at eighteen per cent. Our weapon arrays are engaged but below optimal strength. Hull armour and integrity is weak, but we have a full torpedo payload and launch bays are functional.'

Despite the distance, Numeon could see the two ships were manoeuvring into an intercept course to blockade Nocturne and prevent the *Charybdis* reaching the planet. On the flanks of the larger cruiser, several launch bays opened up.

'The *Reaper's Shroud* is deploying boarding craft.' Esenzi kept up her commentary as the others watched.

'Can we fight them?' asked Numeon, having moved to stand beside the command throne so he could see the tactical hololith Esenzi had just engaged. 'Break through the blockade?'

'We would last minutes before we were overwhelmed. Not long enough to breach their cordon.'

'Can we hail our brothers below on Nocturne?'

It was hope without much to support it. Numeon did not even know if there were Salamanders still on Nocturne, let alone in numbers enough to challenge a Death Guard vessel of the size currently sitting in their way.

Esenzi had already checked. 'Our long-range comms are being jammed.'

Numeon scowled, anger and frustration threatening to overcome reason. He needed to maintain a clear head.

'How many boarding craft?'

'Eighteen, my lord. Thunderhawk gunships.'

Potentially over five hundred legionaries were currently bearing down on them. Even accounting for the rate of attrition from the *Charybdis'*s weapons, it was a force the ship's much-reduced defenders could not overcome. And this was only the first wave.

Esenzi knew it too.

'I have given my life to this Legion, to this mission. It would be my honour to do so until duty ends, my lord. You need only reach the surface. The *Charybdis* can afford you that chance.'

Numeon nodded. He understood.

The aquila Esenzi had given him was wrapped around his wrist. Numeon had almost forgotten it was there. Remarkable, how it hadn't broken, despite the battles. Now he returned it.

Esenzi took the charm.

'Did it work?'

'I stand before you, lord, don't I?'

She smiled, though the weight of her grief made it stop at her lips.

'I can thin out those fighters,' she told him, putting the aquila back around her neck. 'Then I will engage the larger ships, and hold their attention for as long as I can. I don't know this vessel as well as Adyssian did, but I can still give those bastards something to think about. Do what we came here to do, my lord. Return Vulkan to the earth.'

Numeon bowed, not merely an acknowledgement but akin to genuflection. 'You honour this Legion, Lyssa Esenzi,' Numeon told her. 'And you honour Vulkan with your sacrifice.'

Then he left her side, summoning Zytos and the other Salamanders.

'First, we make for the sanctum,' said Numeon. 'And then the launch bays.'

'A small cadre will have to remain to protect the bridge,' said Zytos. 'Otherwise, our own vessel could be turned against us.'

Numeon nodded. 'Abidemi, get Var'kir to the launch–'

'I will stay,' said the Chaplain, having risen to his feet. He tilted his head as he spoke. With his sight gone, he had to rely on his other senses. It was disorientating, but transhumans could adapt quickly.

'You will almost certainly die, Var'kir. I cannot allow–'

'Waste time fighting me or fulfil your destiny, Artellus. The outcome of who remains on this ship will be the same. I am staying. Take our father to his rest and then come what may.'

'No drake was ever more stubborn, Phaestus.'

Numeon embraced him. As he did so, Var'kir held him close and spoke quietly into his ear.

'I saw you stood before the mountain as the skies ran red and fire rained, brother. I know not what it means, but sensed it presaged something of great import.'

Numeon broke away, confusion writ upon his face, but quickly recovered.

'Die well, Chaplain.'

Var'kir snorted, turning away. 'No such death exists for us, legionary. And don't send Xathen. Throne knows he wants it, but I cannot suffer him in my final

moments.’

At that, Numeon departed with the others.

Once outside of the bridge, he told Zytos, ‘Vox whoever is left. Have two return to the bridge and secure it. Volunteers only. The rest come with us to escort our father back to Nocturne.’

‘We will be one ship against many,’ Zytos warned.

‘I don’t plan on fighting them. We just have to run the gauntlet and reach the surface intact.’

‘What about Hecht?’

‘Whatever his mission was or still is, we can’t take him any further. If he shows up and tries to stop us, we put him down, agent of Malcador or not.’

FIFTY-EIGHT

Cast off the mask

Battle-barge Charybdis*, solitorium*

After they had reached the borders of the Segmentum Solar, Hecht had retreated to the solitorium. He waited until Numeon and Var'kir had left before secreting himself within the sanctuary. His mind strained under the weight of two conflicting psyches. During his reunion with Quor Gallek, he had believed he was Barthusa Narek but then, confronted by the reality of his mission, another had begun to assert itself. Kaspian Hecht.

He was broken: a personality fractured across a bifurcating line, neither wholly one nor the other.

Narek tried to remember what had been done to him. Hecht fought to deny it.

'Who am I?' he asked the dormant flame, flickering in its iron cradle.

No answer came.

He drew his knife. It had been polished to a mirror sheen but Narek did not recognise the face reflected back at him in the blade. In the lambent light it appeared like an impostor, an unseen and unknown identity.

Kill the primarch. That was what his instincts were telling him. The Lord of Drakes… But he was already dead, wasn't he? Nevertheless, the imperative lingered.

It would be easy enough. Two more guards had been posted by the entrance to the sanctum. He could kill them. Only two Salamanders aboard this ship would present a challenge, and both of them were far enough away not to matter.

But whenever Narek considered it, he hesitated, as if a counter impulse had been put in his way.

And so he came to the solitorium, to try to order his thoughts.

Two minds could not exist in one body for long, even a transhuman one. It would tear him apart, half Narek, half Hecht. He could already feel himself unravelling.

To lose one's identity, it tapped into something primal, something no hypno-conditioning could entirely contain.

Fear seized him, genuine fear. The first he had ever known, or could remember.

'Whose are these hands?' he asked aloud, and heard the question echoed back. 'This voice?' he cried.

Trying to regress, he thought back to the storage crate when he had first awoken. He also remembered his cell on Macragge, and Titus Prayto's interrogations. At times, the latter felt like another life, like *another's* life. At others, it was his history.

He was slipping again. He thought about the crate, and about the body he had found within it. He remembered the armour. He remembered *being* Barthusa Narek. The civilians he had slain to take over the freighter. Docking at Rampart when his fuel had ebbed to fumes. The imperative to find fresh transport had been strong.

A directive, almost like a conditioned reflex.

Is Kaspian Hecht really Barthusa Narek or is Barthusa Narek really Kaspian Hecht?

It spiralled endlessly.

I was taken.

He could deduce that much. One moment in a cell in the Eastern Keep, the next in the darkness of the storage crate.

Smuggled off Macragge…

But by whom? The one whose body he had regained consciousness next to?

And to what end?

A psyker.

Not Titus Prayto, someone more powerful. Strong enough to cloak their escape and confound the sons of Guilliman in their own house.

Only one psyker allied to the Imperium that Narek knew of could achieve that feat. His mark adorned the grey, nondescript armour that Narek wore. But it could not have been him.

At least… not directly.

Another then, his body a conduit for the will of the Sigillite.

First Lord of Terra, Grand Master of…

'Assassins,' Narek said aloud. He lifted his knife so he could see the unfamiliar

face staring back at him in the blade. It was unremarkable, forgettable. A mask. To get him out of Ultramar.

'You are not the face of Kaspian Hecht,' said Narek. Raising the knife to his cheek he made a small incision, just long enough to reach under it with his gauntleted finger. There was blood, but not much. He cut deeper. Longer. This time he gently dug up a flap of skin. Still, so little blood. Cursory. Minimal.

And as he peeled back the layer, he saw not flesh, not tissue or muscle or even skull. Narek saw more skin. It carried etchings that he recognised. Colchisian cuneiform.

It was *his* skin, Barthusa Narek's skin.

He pulled hard and the false flesh peeled off entirely, leaving a gruesome synth-skin mask in Narek's hands. An iron ewer stood by the brazier, intended for the dousing of the flame and the raising of steam. He used it to cleanse his blade.

'I know this face,' he uttered to the shadows, and with that further revelation came swiftly.

Kaspian Hecht *had* lived. He had been a psyker, his purpose to modify Narek's mind, to bend and manipulate, to obscure even from the subject himself, *who* he was. He knew because Hecht knew it and he *was* Hecht, a part of him anyway.

But something had gone wrong. Kaspian Hecht was dead, though something of him clung on, alive inside Narek's mind.

'I am a son of the Word. I am Narek.'

The sound of a blade slipping its sheath made him turn.

'That is unfortunate,' said Rek'or Xathen, standing in the archway to the solitorium. 'Because it means I am going to have to kill you now.'

Narek rose from his kneeling position, his knife held loosely in his grasp.

'Only two warriors aboard this ship are capable of defeating me in single combat.'

'Arrogant *and* a traitor,' Xathen replied, not bothering to hide his disgust at the pieces of skin mask still clinging to Narek's face.

'Just weary,' said Narek, and looked it. 'Do you know how many people want to kill me?'

'I would think a great many.'

Narek nodded. 'You would be correct. I am traitor to you and pariah to my own Legion. I saw *His* light, and I knew then that I trod the wrong path. Only now I am uncertain what my path is.'

Xathen twirled around his blade to loosen up his wrist.

'Is this meant to garner sympathy? You will find none in me. It was the blood

of my brothers you shed on the black sand.'

'No, I merely tell you so that there is another soul who has heard it. Even now as I speak the words to you, it sounds inconceivable.'

'From the moment we left Macragge, this *journey* has been inconceivable. Was this your doing somehow? A viper in our ranks, influencing our minds so we cast ourselves adrift again?'

Narek showed his hands in genuine contrition.

'It is one crime of which I am innocent. You Drakes did this alone. Are you so sure you will fail? Where is your faith in your Legion?'

'It died on bloody, black sand, *your* knives lodged firmly in our backs. We should have died there. *I* should have died, but we survived and have limped on ever since. That is the cruellest irony about all of this – we are the dead ferrying the dead.'

'I don't want to kill you. We once fought as allies when you knew me as Kaspian Hecht.'

Xathen's eyes narrowed and he took a step into the solitorium, slowly closing Narek down. 'Whatever armour you clad your body in, whoever's skin you hide your true self behind does not change what you are, betrayer.'

'This is foolish, Xathen.'

'Don't speak my name like we are brothers. Ready your blade. I won't strike you down as you struck my brothers down.'

'As you wish,' said Narek, cracking his knuckles. 'You should know something before we begin, though.'

'What's that?'

'Those two warriors I mentioned… You are not one of them.'

Both legionaries took up their fighting stances and were about to begin when the general alert sounded. Klaxons shrieked throughout the solitorium as Esenzi's voice issued through the vox. They had broken back into real space, in sight of Nocturne. She urged all to battle stations, lamenting the death of Kolo Adyssian, but instilling in her crew the resolve to avenge him and achieve what they had lost so much striving to achieve, to deliver Vulkan.

Xathen appeared stunned at the news, as if he were scarcely able to comprehend it.

'Impossible…' he breathed, his attention elsewhere for but a moment as the import of what he had just heard sank in.

Narek needed less than half that time to act.

He sprang forwards, parrying Xathen's instinctive thrust, turning it aside and

coming in close to crash his forehead into the Salamander's nose.

Spitting fury, Xathen reeled but Narek pressed the advantage by seizing the back of his head and smashing it hard against the solitorium's unyielding wall. Something cracked, either bone or rock. Potentially both. Either way, it left Xathen out cold and slumped on the floor.

Narek had to move quickly. Quor Gallek had a henchman of a sort that Narek knew well, and who knew him. Esenzi had identified the *Monarchia* as one of the enemy vessels bearing down on the *Charybdis*. That meant Degat. Narek's defection would have offended Degat's twisted sense of honour. He would be coming for him.

He looked down at the unconscious Salamander.

'Looks like you get to live a little longer, brother.'

FIFTY-NINE

Gauntlet

The void

Degat hunkered down in the troop hold of the gunship, eyes down as he re-toothed the belt on his chainsword.

His warriors sat around him, similarly braced in restraint harnesses, their boots mag-locked and breathing through their helms' respiratory systems in the zero gravity.

Unclipping a bent adamantium tooth, Degat let it float away and quickly affixed another.

Sharp enough to cut away his soul and send it screaming into the aether.

His belligerent thoughts weren't echoed in his body language. Degat moved only when he needed to, as still as a statue and machine-like in his efficiency of motion. He breathed deeply though, a helm slammed over his preferred rebreather mask for now, watching as the internal chronometer counted down the minutes to interception.

Degat didn't care about the Salamanders any more, nor was he concerned by the Death Guard commander's orders. Who was this Barbaran savage to order him around anyway? The thought was enough to raise a slight smile.

No, Degat had only one objective in mind as he hurtled through the void alongside his kin: to find Barthusa Narek and to kill him.

A warning siren signalled their proximity to the enemy vessel. She was firing and they were in range of her formidable arsenal. The pilot's voice issuing through Degat's helm vox informed them he was taking evasive action.

Every one of the boarding craft launched from the *Reaper's Shroud* would be.

Several would not be fast enough, but Degat knew his would not be amongst

them. Fate demanded he meet Narek again. It had been foretold.

On the bridge of the *Reaper's Shroud,* Laestygon watched the hololith unblinking from his throne.

Eighteen boarding craft, including one carrying the Preacher's warriors, sped across the gulf between the two ships. At full burn, the gunships would take a matter of minutes to reach the *Charybdis*.

They would need to be swift. The Salamanders had answered the threat by unleashing the ship's guns against the potential boarders.

Laestygon had sent missiles amongst his flock of boarding craft too. Each carried a virulent contagion, products of his Destroyer cadre. Against the ship's armoured hull, they would burn and degrade. Versus the mortal crew aboard they would reduce skin to flensed bone.

'Rack,' Laestygon rasped, summoning the attention of his shipmaster, who was watching the trajectory of the launched vessels almost as closely as his Death Guard overlord. 'Fire off a few salvoes. Strip their shields. Cripple them. Everything dies aboard but leave the vessel intact. I shall enter the primarch's mausoleum myself and cut off his head.'

Wisely, subserviently, Rack did as bidden.

The bridge of the *Reaper's Shroud* shook with the discharge of its broadsides a few moments later.

'You will find his skin tough, Laestygon,' uttered Quor Gallek.

Since his arrival aboard the *Reaper's Shroud*, the Preacher had been a near-anonymous presence on the bridge. Though he wore his battleplate instead of the ridiculous and craven robes of the prophet he claimed to be, Laestygon thought Quor Gallek still looked less of a warrior than his wretched shipmaster.

He senses his usefulness ending, thought Laestygon, and considered how much longer he needed the Word Bearer around. He also considered if he would honour the promise he had given, to let him flee.

Laestygon rapped his kukra, his gauntleted fist emitting a metal clang as it struck the blade.

'Then I shall strike hard and with purpose.'

'I remind you of our agreement. I take the fulgurite, the rest is yours.'

'You are in no position to remind me of anything, preacher. Pray your war dog succeeds in leading my warriors to the sanctuary.'

Quor Gallek said nothing further, which made Laestygon smile.

As soon as I have Vulkan's body…

Down in the launch bays, the *Charybdis* shuddered as its shields were struck by a punitive barrage from the two enemy ships.

Labour crews and enginseers toiled hard to get the gunship ready. There were fighters already primed, but too few pilots to fly them. An entire arsenal lying fallow since the sirens had their slaughter. Every able-bodied man and woman not charged with keeping the ship moving and fighting was guarding the bridge. Out of warp, the mortal defenders could move freely now, but were much diminished. Despite the hopelessness of their plight, every one had ash streaked across his or her face to echo and honour their lords.

More than twenty Salamanders had assembled on the deck.

In the end, Mu'garna and Baduk had volunteered to stay behind and protect the bridge. Xathen was curiously absent, but Numeon had no time to search for the veteran sergeant now.

The rest stood reverently around the casket of the primarch, which had been brought up from the cargo hold and hovered at waist height on anti-gravity impellers.

No sign came from the Lord of Drakes that he would or could stir. His face was as still as rock, his flesh as inviolable as obsidian.

'Will he breathe still?' asked Abidemi in a low whisper.

'Once he is returned to the fire, he will do more than breathe,' answered Numeon. 'He will rise, reborn.'

Zytos murmured the primarch's name under his breath, echoed by Gargo.

An enginseer signalled the gunship was ready. As the gang ramp to the hold lowered, Numeon raised Var'kir on the vox.

'Brother, we are about to embark.'

'*And so our journey ends at last.*'

'Stand fast, Var'kir, and know your part in this miracle we have wrought.'

'*Be swift, Numeon. As soon as they realise what we have done, you will be hunted.*'

'I will not be stopped now, brother. Vulkan lives.' Numeon was about to sign off when Var'kir stopped him.

'*Bring our father peace, Artellus. Return him to the earth where he belongs. Then allow yourself some peace. Don't torture yourself any more.*'

The warm glow of determination faded in Numeon, replaced by an icy chill. Var'kir did not want him to doubt, merely to temper his hope. He recalled the vision given unto him by Magnus, of standing before the mountain and the sky red with flame.

A melancholy mood threatened, until Numeon crushed it with his belief. They had crossed the Ruinstorm and breached the veil. In spite of everything, and all they had sacrificed, Nocturne was within their reach.

Nothing was impossible.

Vulkan *would* rise.

All they needed to do was reach Deathfire.

The gang ramp hit the deck with a resounding clang.

At Numeon's silent order, the last of the Salamanders escorted their father aboard.

Abidemi led them, while Zytos lingered, evidently picking up on his brother's unease.

The deck shook again, more violently this time as the shields collapsed entirely.

'Nothing stands in their way now, brother,' Numeon said to Zytos.

'They'll be on us in a few more seconds,' he replied. 'We need to launch and hope we can slip by any cordon that may have been put around the ship.'

Numeon shook his head.

'There'll be no cordon. They won't be expecting us to flee – they'll think we're going to fight.'

'And should we fight?'

'I would gladly die for the brave souls aboard the *Charybdis* but, no, Zytos. Getting our father back onto Nocturnean soil is too important to risk.'

'Then why the doubt?'

'Something I've seen, brother. Something that I think was just for me, *meant* for me for some reason I cannot yet fathom.'

The hull trembled as the *Charybdis* shed armour plate like scales. Every salvo was intended to wound, not kill. Once the Death Guard or the Word Bearers had what they wanted, all restraint would end. That staying of their full military might would give Esenzi some advantage, at least.

'Our path beckons, brother. One that began on Macragge and shall end on Nocturne with the resurrection of Vulkan.'

Numeon nodded, and they made for the gunship.

As the gang ramp closed, and the internal lumes of the troop hold flickered on to lift the gloom, tocsins sounded. The boarding craft had made contact. Enemies were gaining ingress.

It was time to leave.

Engines roaring, the gunship speared through the launch tunnel leaving the fire of afterburners in its wake, until it hit the black void and the war between three

ships unfolding across it.

SIXTY

Ship death

Battle-barge Charybdis*, bridge*

Lyssa Esenzi noted the departure of the gunship through the starboard-side launch bay on the ship's schematic display and turned her attention to an offensive war footing.

With Numeon and most of his warriors in the void, she had to hold the attention of the two enemy vessels. She did so first by focusing the *Charybdis'*s not inconsiderable strength against the smaller ship, which had moved closer to attain a better firing solution.

'Target the *Monarchia,*' she said. 'Full broadside.'

As the order came down, the *Charybdis'*s guns were rolled out and primed.

After a matter of seconds, the guns sounded, their vibrations felt all the way up in the bridge. Esenzi watched the discharge register on her schematic display with grim satisfaction.

The sheer force of the blow smashed the smaller cruiser's voids like a wrecking ball.

'Again,' ordered Esenzi as damage alarums cut the air and infiltration markers from their boarders flashed up red on the display. Orders were given to armsmen squads to intercept. She could see the Salamanders wanted to join the fray, but they were disciplined enough to hold to their posts.

A second salvo tore from the broadsides, filling the void with the silent flash of the *Charybdis'*s devastating bombardment cannons.

'Torpedoes, full spread,' she bellowed, having to shout above the shriek of the alarums, grasping the arms of the command throne as the bridge shuddered with the impact of the enemy guns.

The launch was good, and the deadly payload from the ship's torpedo tubes raced across the void.

More icons flashed on the schematic as the enemy boarders ripped through the inner hull and breached the ship proper. Vox-traffic choked the ship-wide feed as several engagements began at once. Esenzi shut her mind off to the gunfire and the screaming.

Her attention flicked to the tactical feed, one of several hololithic representations she had before her. This one showed the second broadside finish what remained of the *Monarchia*'s port-side void shields. A few moments later, the torpedo payload struck.

Silent blooms of fire, like lightning without thunder, erupted in night-black space.

A good hit. An armour-breaking hit. Though she was too far away to see it, Esenzi imagined scads of plates fluttering off into the void like leaves.

'Hit them again, full broadsides and another spread. Give the aft starboard-side engines full thrust. I want to turn. Bring us in close.'

The legionaries on board the *Charybdis* had broken through sixteen choke points already. Vox-comms from the beleaguered defenders marked their progress through the decks, as it spread like a wildfire.

Only it wasn't wild, it was purposeful and headed for the bridge.

'My noble lords,' said Esenzi, though her primary focus was still on the raging vessel-to-vessel combat.

Mu'garna and Baduk were already moving. They had passed through the blast doors to the bridge and sealed them behind them when the second broadside struck.

Damage reports were flooding the data screed, as the *Charybdis* slowly succumbed to death by increments.

It was nothing compared to the catastrophic blow they dealt the *Monarchia.* What few shields the cruiser had restored were overloaded by the barrage. Huge explosions ripped soundlessly into the darkness, throwing light across the ravaged hull of the Word Bearers ship. Bodies were spilling into the void, frozen in an instant. Some were consumed in the ephemeral fires that lived and died in an eye blink.

Chunks of debris, large deck sections, the baroque arch of a cathedral tower, were already breaking loose in a mass diaspora when the torpedoes struck.

Esenzi rose from her seat when one of the *Monarchia*'s critical systems overloaded and a newborn sun blazed into being to fill the vast oculus view.

Ship death. The bow wake crashed into the *Charybdis* as far away as they were. It took under a minute and hammered the battle-barge's hull.

Esenzi was thrown back down. Fires broke out and servitors were quickly tasked with their suppression. All too audible explosions resounded across the bridge and the decks below as the *Charybdis* began to bleed in earnest.

'How much longer can we hold, shipmistress?' asked the Chaplain. He had remained behind facing the blast doors, though he had no eyes to see what might be coming through them.

Eight more choke points had fallen. The mortal defenders had almost spent their last.

'Shipmistress,' urged the Chaplain, snapping Esenzi free of her grim strategising for a few seconds.

'They are two decks below us. Although a force has headed to the cargo bay.'

The Chaplain smiled.

'They still think he's on board,' said Esenzi.

'Numeon's life and that of all my brothers aboard that gunship depend on our enemy believing that for a little longer.'

'I can focus their attention,' Esenzi declared, noting the *Charybdis* had almost come about. She turned her gaze on the ensign at the helm. 'Full power to the plasma drives.'

A field of wreckage lingered after the *Monarchia'*s demise, only detectable now the electromagnetic flare from its capitulating warp drives had faded.

Esenzi meant to batter her way right through it and into the vessel looming beyond.

She glanced at the schematic display and the aggressive boarding troops she had been tracking.

'One more deck and they will be upon us.' She said it half to herself, but the Chaplain overheard.

A crackle of energy flared from the haft of his dragon-headed mace.

The few armsmen left on the bridge set up firing positions beside him, their weapons aimed at the blast doors.

'Then we had better be swift, shipmistress,' said the Chaplain.

'How can you fight them?' Esenzi asked, as the dorsal-mounted bombardment cannons were swung around to their next target and torpedo bays were restocked for launch.

'With my fire-born belief, shipmistress,' he answered, devoutly. 'I need nothing more than that.'

‘Lord Var’kir…’ Esenzi began, needing to say something to mark these final moments.

‘You have earned the right to use my given name,’ he said. ‘I am Phaestus.’

‘Lyssa Esenzi.’

Var’kir smiled ruefully. ‘You will always be shipmistress to me.’

Alert sirens sounded, ending their moment. A gauge on the schematic feed relayed the strain currently being exerted on the plasma drives. They were already damaged, now pushing beyond acceptable tolerances and red-lining. The engine quake could be felt on the bridge and small fissures had opened up in the vaulted ceiling and walls.

Not long now.

As the dorsal cannons began to roar, Esenzi clasped the aquila around her neck and murmured a prayer for Numeon.

Pieces of shrapnel rattled the outer hull of the gunship as it drove beneath the wake of the *Monarchia’*s destruction.

Though the flame-scorched and ragged carcass of the dead cruiser was little impediment to a vessel like the *Charybdis,* it presented a serious danger to the smaller transport trying to weave through its remains.

The *Monarchia* had broken into several pieces when it was destroyed. Some of those pieces were large and had been catapulted across the void, into the gunship’s path.

A heavy rain battered the hull now, but all too quickly it could turn into an unendurable storm.

Close by, an explosion flared brightly through one of the sealed vision slits, heralding the destruction of a saviour pod. The Salamanders rode in silence amongst the swarm of empty vessels, just another ship amongst many, their heads bowed and their eyes on the recumbent form of their father.

Only one amongst them spoke, and he uttered a name beneath his cinder breath.

‘Vulkan…’ murmured Numeon, the sigil clenched in one gauntleted fist.

SIXTY-ONE

A final reckoning

Battle-barge Charybdis*, cargo hold*

Once they had breached the hull, Degat made for the lower decks. The sanctuary was here, and he was leading a cadre of nine other legionaries to it. Four of his Word Bearers and five of the savage Death Guard. So far they had met no resistance, which had slowed the hunting party to a wary advance instead of the aggressive charge of the warriors trying to storm the bridge above.

Ingress into the ship had not been smooth, although it soon became obvious that the *Charybdis* had few warriors to defend it. Several of the decks had been flooded with coolant or promethium overspill from the various generators and semi-redundant systems.

As soon as any breach was made beyond the outer hull and into the ship proper, the chemical reservoirs inundating those decks were auto-ignited. Legionaries were blasted from their ingress points, back into the void with their armour split and vulnerable. Others were cooked alive.

It damaged the vessel almost irreparably, but then Degat assumed they knew this was their end and had chosen to fight with every iota of desperation they had left. He could respect that, even if it meant little.

'Here,' he said to the others, finding a long arterial corridor, strewn with wreckage but leading to the sanctum. Attempts had been made to clear a path. Degat was about to take them through it when the warrior in charge of the Death Guard, a sergeant called Ukteg, shouldered him aside.

'Laestygon wants the body,' growled Ukteg, his uncultured Barbaran accent making Degat clench his teeth.

The Word Bearer stepped aside, denying his warrior's instincts. He wanted

something else, *someone* else and he wasn't here. His eyes met that of his kin as they allowed the Death Guard to take the lead. They moved slowly and carefully, watching the shadows, vigilant for an ambush, but none came.

Reaching the end of the corridor, they saw why.

'He isn't here,' snarled Ukteg, about to raise Laestygon on the vox when a length of Colchisian steel through his gullet stopped him.

His allies were slow to react. Degat killed a second with a point-blank mass-reactive bolt to the warrior's faceplate, and his brothers gunned down and gutted the rest.

Five stinking Death Guard corpses littered the deck in front of the empty sanctum. Degat put a bolt shell into the heads and chests of each one to make sure they stayed down. Stories of Barbaran endurance might be exaggerated but he saw no reason to take chances.

'Join the others in taking the bridge,' he told his warriors. 'I am going hunting. He's down here somewhere – I can smell the taint of his cowardice and heresy.'

The Word Bearers nodded, almost as eager as Degat for Narek's blood but wise enough not to cross him. They departed as ordered, leaving Degat alone in the shadows of the labyrinthine cargo hold.

He had known the Salamanders would flee with their lord. These were the concerns of the Death Guard and even the Preacher; they were not what mattered to him.

'Announce yourself at least, craven,' he challenged the darkness, steadily moving back down the arterial corridor and into the warren of the cargo hold proper.

No answer came, but it was too quiet. A sort of unearthly emptiness that revealed the presence of another in relative proximity.

'You are here, turncoat. Let me see you. I shall end the pain of your dissension.'

Still no answer came, but Degat's instincts were well honed. He felt someone close by, a sensation akin to that feeling of being watched. He kept low and to the walls, using every scrap of available cover. He knew Narek as a marksman, a warrior who preferred to wage war from a distance. Degat only ever killed up close so he could see his enemy's life fade before him rather than remotely through a sniper scope.

He went deeper, trawling through scattered crates and broken munitions. Lighting overhead flickered and the deck underfoot trembled as the *Charybdis* sustained hit after hit.

The *Reaper's Shroud* would be pulling its punches. As soon as Laestygon

realised Vulkan was no longer aboard, that restraint would end. Degat needed to find Narek before that happened. Nothing would deny him. Not Quor Gallek, not the Death Guard, nothing.

Almost at the next junction, blade and bolt pistol held low and ready, Degat tried a final goad.

'I am your reckoning, Narek. Face me and remove some of the stain from your honour.'

'He's not here,' uttered a deep but powerful voice from the darkness at the end of the next corridor. 'But I am.'

Degat slowed and then stopped, eyes narrowed as he pierced the shadows.

'Drake? Is that you?'

They were at least a hundred paces away from each other. Degat kept a loose grip on his pistol as the Salamander emerged from the shadows.

'Not moving so well, are you?'

Degat smiled, glancing down at the patched up greave clasped around his leg.

'Are you warrior enough to face me hand-to-hand, drake?'

The sound of a blade being drawn from its scabbard was all the answer Degat required.

He holstered his pistol and took a two-handed grip of his chainsword.

Then the two warriors advanced.

'Not fleeing with your lord?' asked Degat.

'I was looking for someone.'

'Huh, so am I.'

Halfway to the Salamander, spurred on by his bravado, Degat realised his mistake.

He stopped, but did not bother to turn.

'We have found him,' he said to the Salamander, who looked confused until a small targeting bead flashed in the darkness.

'Greetings, brother,' Narek uttered in a low, regretful voice. 'You are somewhat noisier than when we last met.'

Degat looked down at his wounded leg then back up again.

'Live bait,' he said, nodding, and simultaneously reached for his bolt pistol and lowered his haunches just a fraction in preparation to turn. 'I'm impress–'

The bolt-round burst through the front of the Word Bearer's skull, taking his rebreather and part of his helm with it. Degat sank to his knees as the weight of his body dragged at him, and fell forwards.

Xathen hadn't moved, the targeting reticule now aligned over his centre mass. He could just about make out the sniper nest Narek had made for himself in the cargo hold's vaults.

'Get it done, Word Bearer. My death is long overdue.'

The reticule lingered for a few more seconds then blinked out.

Xathen unhitched his bolter from his back, hunkering down and dropping to one knee to aim in one fluid motion, but Narek was already gone.

SIXTY-TWO

One last time

Grand cruiser Reaper's Shroud*, bridge*

Laestygon had been deceived. What he believed at first to be a desperate exodus had, in truth, been a subtle camouflage. So intent had he been on the *Charybdis* that he had failed to realise it, but now he saw the gunship amidst the saviour pods cascading down towards Nocturne.

'They have him,' he murmured, raising his voice to speak to Rack. 'Annihilate the *Charybdis*. All weapons.'

Rack hesitated, daring to say, 'Our warriors are still aboard, commander.'

Laestygon rounded on him, surging up from his throne to loom over his terrified shipmaster. 'Destroy it! Before it destroys us. And send fighters to bring that gunship down.'

'Over Nocturnean soil?' asked Quor Gallek, still trying to hold back the anger at his own ship's recent callous destruction. Laestygon had thrown it against the ire of the battered but much larger battle-barge to give his legionaries more time to secure his prize.

'Over *any* soil. The Eighteenth are but scraps, preacher. We saw to that on Isstvan. I want Vulkan's head, you want the fulgurite. There is nothing further to discuss.'

'Attacking a Legion world is tantamount to suicide, Laestygon.'

'No, it is not. I will conquer Nocturne or raze it to ash. Either way, the skull of Vulkan shall be mine.'

Rack relayed the order, and the guns fired up as a fleet of fighters spewed from their launch bays on the hunt.

'Bring them down,' Laestygon rasped, returning to his seat. 'Bring them both

down.’

A fusillade of such strength struck the *Charybdis* that the bridge crew were thrown off their feet. Even Var’kir could not stay standing and he heard the crack of the ship’s superstructure breaking apart around them. He smelt smoke and felt the heat of burning.

‘Shipmistress?’ he called out to Esenzi, who answered groggily.

‘I’m here. Still alive.’

Noises of combat filtered through the blast doors as Mu’garna and Baduk fought to keep the boarders at bay. They lasted much longer than the strangled vox reports of the armsmen and the other indentured mortal defenders before their resistance ended with silence, just like the rest.

‘No more defences,’ said Esenzi.

Var’kir heard her leave her command throne. The ship was taking serious damage now. Entire decks and hundreds of crew had been lost. Their shields were down, their armour almost depleted. Even their weapons had been neutralised.

‘Are you standing with me, shipmistress?’ he asked, but heard Esenzi prime her sidearm before she answered.

‘There is little else for it now.’

The engines were burning into overdrive, their constant shuddering refrain abusing the hull almost as badly as the punitive barrages now hailing from the *Reaper’s Shroud.*

The crackle and hiss of plasma-cutters burning through the blast doors heralded the end. Var’kir knew as soon as the enemy legionaries got inside it was over.

It didn’t matter how many they faced. A squad could usurp command now and slaughter every Imperial servant on the bridge.

Var’kir heard the doors slowly shriek open; their locking mechanism had been cut but, bereft of power, they still needed to be levered apart.

‘Fire!’

He had barely spoken when the firing squad of armsmen unleashed their guns, Esenzi too.

Though he couldn’t see the effect, he knew it would be superficial at best. No mortal armsmen were ever meant to fight the Legiones Astartes. It had simply never been considered they would ever need to.

‘Take them down!’ shouted Esenzi, and Var’kir realised why she sounded so desperate.

The Death Guard had sent breachers, armoured behind their boarding shields. He could heard the ricochet of solid shot against them.

No weapon the defenders currently possessed could penetrate such defences.

Taking a hit to his right greave, Var'kir raised his crozius in salute of all those who had died to bring Vulkan back to Nocturne and prepared to charge blindly into the swell of combat.

A familiar war-cry stopped him, followed by the sound of heavy hand-to-hand fighting. Before Var'kir could pinpoint exactly what was happening, an explosion roared into being, heard and felt but not seen. He was thrown, the agony slow to build but burning by the time he landed.

Disorientated, Var'kir struggled to rise. Belatedly, he realised one of his legs had been severed by the blast. Hearing footsteps approach through the fire and the near-final destruction of the ship, he reached for his fallen crozius.

'Shipmistress, are you–' he began.

'She's dead, Var'kir.'

'Xathen?'

'They are all dead.'

He felt a gauntleted hand grasp his and hoist him into a sitting position.

'Barring a few servitors, we are the last souls alive on this ship,' said Xathen.

Var'kir could still feel the engines thrumming beneath him, slowly shaking the ship apart as if acting in concert with the *Reaper's Shroud*'s guns.

'Rek'or…' he croaked, swallowing back the blood coming up like bile through his throat, '…did they make it?'

'I don't know, brother. I have hope, though.'

Var'kir gave him a bitter laugh. 'You? I thought you said we were insane.'

'You are, but we did breach the veil.'

The bridge was breaking, the entire ship surrendering to the fury of the *Reaper's Shroud.*

Var'kir nodded, every movement causing him pain.

Xathen held him up, so he could at least face the viewport, even though he couldn't see what was through it.

'It is… incredible,' Xathen breathed, his voice quaking with the violently trembling bridge.

'Our world.'

Var'kir felt Xathen rest a hand on his shoulder.

'Vulkan lives, Chaplain.'

Var'kir smiled, despite the pain.

‘In every deed we do from now until the time of ending.’

‘Not long now,’ said Xathen, as the cracking reached a crescendo and the fires of immolation drew near.

‘At least,’ said Var’kir, as the *Charybdis* broke apart, ‘I saw Nocturne one last time.’

SIXTY-THREE

Brought down to earth

Grand Cruiser Reaper's Shroud*, bridge*

The death of the *Charybdis* sent a tremor through the void, sundering the shields of the *Reaper's Shroud* and throwing a hail of wreckage into its unprotected flank.

Hundreds were slain in moments as entire decks were ripped open and exposed to the cold grasp of space. Labour gangs reacted as fast as they could, sealing blast doors and lowering bulkheads in an attempt to maintain the damaged ship's integrity, but fires still tore through its close confines.

Worst affected were the aft decks, including the enginarium and a large number of port-side launch bays. A host of fighters and gunships in the midst of atmospheric deployment were ripped to shreds by the debris storm, thus denying the vanguard ships sent after the Salamanders any immediate reinforcement.

The suicidal act of wrath from the *Charybdis* had near crippled the *Reaper's Shroud,* reducing its offensive capabilities, shields and onboard military strength. It had even reached as far as the bridge.

Laestygon heaved Rack's corpse aside and the hololith flickered back into being. Obscured by smoke, the grainy render described the passage of three vessels through a welter of debris.

Two angular gunships led the hunt, arcing through drifts of saviour pod wreckage, with a troop transport close on their tails. Silent muzzle flares registered on the crackling feed as the pair of Fire Raptors unleashed their prow weapons.

Hot tracer fire from twin-mounted Avengers tore up the void and the pod fragments ricocheting from the fleeing vessel's ablative armour, but couldn't yet

draw a bead on the Salamanders ship itself.

Laestygon ignored the desperate shouting of the first officer as he tried to restore order in the wake of Rack's untimely death. He ignored the screams and the scent of burning. He barely heard the sirens and the buckling spars of the ship's abused hull. All his attention was focused on the Salamanders careening towards Nocturne and the Raptors screaming after them.

Soon they would hit the atmosphere, and then a planetary assault became not just a possibility but a necessity. Despite the damage sustained by the *Reaper's Shroud,* their chemical weaponry remained intact and operational.

'Hunt them down. Wound them…' ordered Laestygon, leaning forwards to get closer to the image as he saw the noose begin to close. 'Then I shall scour the surface to nought but barren rock.'

As the gunship breached the upper atmosphere of Nocturne, the temperature inside the troop hold intensified and the interior hull began to shake against the rigours of fast re-entry.

The heat was enough to encourage wisps of steam to manifest as the chill of the void melted away, but it was nothing to a legionary and less than nothing to a Salamander.

The Drakes stayed silent throughout the descent, even Numeon, eyes down in vigil for their fallen lord.

A glancing hit against the port-side wing snapped them out of their reverie.

Numeon was first to his feet, disengaging his restraint harness and the mag-lock on his boots that had secured him to the deck during atmospheric transit. He reached the side hatch, racking it open with one hand, steadying himself with the other as the gunship pitched hard to avoid a second hit.

Smoke occluded his view at first as he hung out of the hatch. As the black cloud was swept away for a moment, he saw the predatory Raptors coursing after them and the staccato report of their nose-mounted Avenger bolt cannons.

In their wake, distorted by the heat haze, was a Storm Eagle.

Their intent was obvious.

The two Raptors would run them down and the Eagle would take the primarch.

He looked down and saw an ash plain speeding by beneath them through scads of pyroclastic cloud. Up ahead, although still distant, loomed a craggy mountain chain that Numeon knew well.

Deathfire.

The fount of life and death, the beating heart of Nocturne. Much more than a

mountain, it was a symbol, a fiery beacon reminding all on the death world how fragile life truly was. Ever since the forming of the world, there had been Deathfire. And at the world's ending, the mountain would be the last to fall.

Numeon's vision came back to him, the one granted by Magnus the Red.

Standing in its shadow, the sky red with flame…

Feron's voice broke through the memory, fighting against the warning klaxons resonating around the hold.

'*Hold on! Emergency evasive!*' shouted the pilot.

A pillar of flame burst from the desert, an eruption of magma forced to the surface that made the ship bank hard.

It was a salutary reminder of Nocturne's deadly nature. Yes, it was the Salamanders' home but it could kill them just as easily as an interloper, they just knew the dangers more intimately.

Numeon clung on, then tried to shout a warning as the Raptor fired again, but it was too late. A line of shells stitched through the gunship's fuselage, tearing up the engine and setting the port turbofan ablaze. It exploded seconds later and the gunship pitched into an immediate dive.

The pilot's voice returned.

'*Brace, brace, brace!*'

Strong hands grasped Numeon by the shoulders, hurling him back before he was thrown from the gunship to his death.

His eyes met those of Zytos, who was clinging to the deck.

Numeon did the same. The others were still locked in their harnesses. At least five Salamanders were dead, cut apart by the brutal passage of the bolt cannon as it tore through the hull.

'When they come for us!' He had to shout against the engine scream and the roar of the wind, buffeting the troop hold through the open side hatch. 'When they come for us… be ready to fight!'

The last thing he heard before they hit the earth was Feron's voice, his pain evident as the cockpit burned around him.

'*Vulkan lives!*'

Then came fire and a cacophony of tearing metal, before darkness took them.

Stultifying heat and the acerbic reek of the desert wafted through the ripped-up flank of the gunship.

Something was burning, the earth or the transport. Possibly both. The crash had taken them into a deep fire gorge; Numeon could see the dun-coloured flanks of

the crags either side through coils of smoke.

He heard the crackle of flame towards the prow and saw it was embedded in an ash dune, scorched black and beyond recall.

'Feron's dead,' he rasped, half choked by the thick ash drifting through the shattered fuselage and slowly swathing the ship's interior. His armour now wore a thickening veneer of grey.

'So are Mur'ak and Kadir,' said Zytos, wrenching off his battered helm and letting it fall with a clang against the deck.

'Xorn too,' added Gargo, kneeling by the slain warrior who had been impaled by the shredded fuselage.

'They are not the only ones,' said Numeon sadly as he regarded the five killed by the Raptor's guns. Twelve remained.

Engine drone thrummed on the air, resonating down into the deep gorge.

'They'll be hunting for us,' said Abidemi, helping one of his brothers back to his feet.

'All this smoke…' said Numeon, a glance at Vulkan's casket reassuring him that it was intact and unharmed. 'They'll be on us soon. We need to get free of this wreck.'

The ship had turned as it ploughed into the earth, leaving the side hatch overhead and the interior cramped with broken metal spars, hanging wires and lengths of cabling.

'We can't get the primarch out through that,' said Numeon.

Abidemi had stopped to listen.

'Getting closer…'

'Gargo,' Zytos called across the hold, gesturing to the ship's gang ramp and their only viable egress, 'can you rip out the locking clamp?'

The black-smiter nodded, carefully navigating the wreckage until he made it to the back of the troop hold. Once there, he punched through the housing block encasing the locking clamp with his bionic arm and crushed it.

'Appreciated,' said Zytos and smacked open the ramp with two strong hits, levering it like a swinging door.

Together, the Salamanders detached the casket from the hold and slowly manoeuvred it through the gaping rear hatch of the ship.

Abidemi took point, watching the clouded skies through his bolter's scope.

Once beyond the immediate crash site, he beckoned the others.

Debris radiated from the gunship's impact point in a slowly diminishing trail. The port wing had sheared off completely but was nowhere in sight. Chunks of

torn fuselage had embedded in the earth, jutting up like broken metal teeth.

'Where are we?' asked Gargo as they consolidated behind one of the larger sections of broken fuselage.

'Too far from Deathfire and on foot,' Numeon replied grimly.

Dactylids circled above, briefly flocking as they sought out carrion before the roar of approaching engines scattered them.

A Death Guard Fire Raptor soared through parting cloud, a forbidding silhouette against an already blood-red sky.

Bolter rounds pranged harmlessly off its reinforced hull as the Salamanders opened fire, before it dipped its nose and sped up for a strafing run.

'They'll cut us down and take his body,' said Zytos.

Without heavy weapons, they were dead. No chunk of fuselage would save them, but they held their ground anyway.

The bolt cannons in the Raptor's nose cone began to cycle up as a missile struck its flank, pushing the gunship out of its strafing run and smashing it explosively against the canyon wall.

Three drake-green gunships hurtled overhead.

The Salamanders *were* on Nocturne, and they had come to the aid of their lord.

Through initial static, Numeon's vox-bead activated.

'*Brothers, this is Nomus Rhy'tan. Whom do I address?*'

Numeon could have wept with the relief he felt.

'Artellus Numeon and eleven brothers of the Pyre, bearing an important burden. The primarch himself.'

'*Vulkan?*'

Rhy'tan sounded hopeful, yet disbelieving. He paused as if letting the import of it sink in. Var'kir's old mentor did not hesitate for long.

'*Hold fast, brothers. We are coming.*'

The feed was cut, leaving Numeon and the other survivors watching the skies and listening to the distant sounds of battle echoing down into the gorge.

'Nomus Rhy'tan?' asked Zytos. '*The* Nomus Rhy'tan?'

'Voice of Fire and Keeper of the Keys,' Numeon replied. 'I am sorry Var'kir is not here for this.'

They fell silent after that until the shadow of a gunship loomed through the smoke, making landfall inside the gorge on a flat slab of granite.

As the Pyre made their way to it, the gunship's rear ramp swung open and a black-armoured Chaplain stepped forth with an honour guard of draconic warriors behind him.

Firedrakes.

Numeon had thought them all dead.

The two groups of Salamanders met amidst squalling eddies of dust kicked up by the downdraught of the Thunderhawk's engines.

As they came face to face, Rhy'tan proffered his gauntleted hand to Numeon and they gripped each other's forearm in the manner of warriors.

Though his trappings had many similarities to Var'kir's, they were at once more regal and finely wrought. The immense double-handed obsidian hammer strapped to Rhy'tan's back was regarded as a Legion relic.

'Your arrival is timely, brother-captain,' said Rhy'tan, as they broke apart again. Even through the respirator grille of his skull mask, his deep voice conveyed age and wisdom. 'I had thought all the Pyre Guard slain at Isstvan.'

'I am glad to disprove it, but many died during the massacre.'

Rhy'tan nodded grimly. 'We've heard but snatches of the rebellion and the war. So little is known to us.'

He looked at the casket behind Numeon that was flanked by the Pyre captain's warriors.

'Vulkan…' he murmured. 'Is he…?'

'He sleeps, Lord Chaplain.'

Rhy'tan turned sharply to face Numeon.

'I had heard he was dead,' he said, incredulous.

'He can be revived, brought back. In fire.'

'How can you know this, brother-captain?'

'I *believe* it, just as I believed we would breach the Ruinstorm and find our way to Nocturne. There is much you do not know.'

Glancing at the ragged state of Numeon and his men, Rhy'tan assumed that was the case.

'You endured fire to bring our father back,' he said, as if he could agree on that much but nothing else. Not yet. 'Time shall be made for talk. For now, we need to leave the ash plain. A ship has come into our upper atmosphere and is laying anchor.'

'The *Reaper's Shroud.* Death Guard,' said Numeon. 'It has hounded us since Macragge.'

Rhy'tan's eyes widened as he looked to the casket again, as if imagining the journey it had been on to reach Nocturne.

'A great undertaking indeed.'

'I fear we brought war back with us, Lord Chaplain.'

As he faced Numeon again, Rhy'tan spoke as if he wore a feral smile.

'Then they shall find we Salamanders still have teeth.'

'There are warriors here still?' asked Numeon as they began to walk.

'Some. Neophytes mainly. I maintain a small honour guard, as you have seen.'

'And what of the Legion fortress on Prometheus?'

'Master T'kell has a modest garrison, but most went to Isstvan. Those who remain will take time to muster. We have ships but they won't reach us soon enough,' said Rhy'tan. 'Gereon remains silent, although there could be Drakes there still. We have been blind and deaf for some time, Numeon.'

Numeon fell silent as they approached the gang ramp, knowing all too well what that felt like.

'I will have need of your battle-hardened veterans, brother-captain,' said Rhy'tan, once they were aboard.

'We are yours, Lord Chaplain,' Numeon replied, meeting Rhy'tan's gaze across the hold. 'But where do we make this stand?'

'An outpost,' said Rhy'tan, as the engines roared and the ship began to rise. 'One of many that were fashioned after word of the rebellion reached us. The Draconius Gate.'

Numeon knew of the region, but nothing of the outpost. It would need to be formidable to withstand the Death Guard's might, and so would the warriors that his Salamanders were meant to command.

As the gunship raced across the desert and the sun burned the sky to a bloody red, Numeon could not shake a deep sense of foreboding.

Against all odds, they had brought Vulkan back. He saw the questions in Rhy'tan's eyes, the doubt. If Vulkan did rise, what would it mean for the Legion? What would it mean if he didn't?

In his very soul, Numeon was convinced Vulkan would return. So devoted was he towards this aim, he had not stopped to think whether the primarch would be changed by his ordeal.

Until now, he had not considered whether they *should* do it, just if they *could* do it. Being on Nocturne, amongst fellow Salamanders beyond those sworn warriors of the Pyre, had skewed his perspective.

Magnus the Red had claimed his hand in the miracles Numeon had not only witnessed but been party to. What if there was a darker strand of fate at work, one to which his obsession had made him blind?

When the *Charybdis* had emerged within sight of Holy Terra, Numeon had believed then that that was the trial of his faith and devotion. A moment when he

could have turned back.

He saw now that he had been wrong. It was not over.

A final trial yet awaited.

A second vessel had made landfall after the Salamanders gunship. It was conical in shape, and had no weapons. Its trajectory was largely predetermined before launch but by sheer luck or something more divisive, it had delivered its sole occupant to Nocturne.

SIXTY-FOUR

Bombardment

Nocturne, Arridian Plain, the Draconius Gate

It began as thunder, a rumbling underbelly that filled the dark clouds overhead with foreboding.

Almost eight hundred Salamanders had amassed on the Arridian Plain, within bunkers and behind walls hewn into dark granite cliffs, and in sight of the two great arcs of stone known as the Draconius Gate.

Drake heads had been carved into the apex of both half-arches. Gems served as eyes, and sigils ran the length of their craggy hides all the way back to the cracked earth in which they were embedded. The two edifices of basalt had stood for centuries, fashioned by the earth shamans of ancient Nocturne. The fastness that had grown within their shadow was more recent.

Slab-sided redoubts and ornate barbicans decorated with the gilded heads of mythic beasts stood stalwart on the ash plain. One shouldered another, closing in a near-impenetrable chain formed by a union of rare minerals, adamantium and tempered ceramite.

The Draconius Gate had resisted entropy; it had endured firestorms, earthquakes and volcanic eruption. So too had its fortress outpost, raised in one of the most inhospitable regions of the death world.

The mouths of the gate appeared to snarl at the unnatural storm as the very air filled with the stench of plague. Above, the dense clouds took on an unhealthy bile-yellow cast.

‘Raise shields!’

Vox-horns rang out at Nomus Rhy’tan’s command, a warning call for the Techmarine Covenants.

Across the Draconius Gate several immense void shields flickered into being, generated by eight soaring activator-pylons.

Hunkered down inside the bunkers or manning the walls, the Salamanders watched as poison rained upon Nocturne.

Looking through a viewing block in the Wyvern Hold, the foremost bunker, Numeon waited for death to descend.

'They are tenacious,' remarked Zytos, standing with his captain who gazed up into the clouds and imagined the Death Guard forces poised for assault.

'We must be greater.' He turned to his sergeant, his eye alive with brightness. 'And we must instil greatness in those around us.'

Neophytes wearing pristine battleplate made up the bulk of the Salamander garrison. Wisely, Numeon had dispersed his Pyre veterans around them to help inspire and command. Gargo had joined the Techmarines, no more than a journeyman but one with the experience of working alongside Far'kor Zonn.

Numeon knew he would need an able sergeant and trusted no one more than Barek Zytos. They had begun this together, and so it would end the same.

'A larger force than we expected to have,' Zytos conceded.

Numeon's gaze had returned to the clouds. 'And yet still so few.'

Zytos agreed. 'Against warriors hardened by the war.'

'And that also likely outnumber us, brother,' Numeon replied.

Vulkan's casket was secured in the fastness deep, safe within a sealed vault. It irked Numeon that they had reached Nocturne but, as of yet, had merely traded one tomb for another.

Cold steel and cold stone were no place for the Lord of Drakes. The fire beckoned, but first the Death Guard must be repelled.

By mustering in force, Rhy'tan hoped the Death Guard's wrath would fall on the Legion and not the mortals taking refuge in any of the Sanctuary Cities. Numeon knew it would work. The Death Guard wanted Vulkan; they had shown that much of their plans. Wherever the primarch was, that was where the blow would fall hardest.

'Here they come,' declared Zytos, as all eyes went to the heavens.

Where the missiles struck they broke apart, releasing palls of virulent contagion into the atmosphere. Flesh-eating bacteria combined with deadly nerve agents into a soup of foulness that could render entire populations to liquified matter in seconds.

Most worlds would have died from such a bombardment, their armies reduced to slurry, their war machines corroded and useless. But Nocturne was not most

worlds. It had been ending life ever since its creation, anathema to all but the hardiest of survivors.

The poisons burned as soon as they were released, but were not immediately destroyed by the fiery atmosphere They clung like a terminal disease, lingering, changing, fighting for life. It was as if something sentient and profoundly mutagenic had fallen upon the death world to scour it utterly.

A bile-yellow miasma had begun to form, coalescing from where the heaviest concentrations of the contagion had fallen. It dispersed rapidly, voraciously, lending more weight to the abhorrent theory that it possessed a will and desire beyond that of a mere virus or agglomeration of spores.

Rhy'tan saw the danger before the voids began to shudder with interference.

'Engage burners.'

Stationed across the outpost, batteries of auto-flamers spewed forth an inferno. Though the range of the guns was limited, the life-eater virus had gathered such momentum that it had almost reached the outer defences.

Hot incendiary fire and scalding steam broke through the desert surface at the same time as the flamers engaged, like the white blood cells of the world reacting to a foreign invader.

The taint slowed, almost recoiling, but endured.

As it reached the walls, ranks of incinerators embedded around the outpost unleashed a conflagration of such intensity that it was impossible to see through the blinding haze. The air around the voids became a furnace, hot enough to turn steel to liquid. So intense was the blaze that the outer void shielding darkened, obscuring the view beyond.

Numeon clamped on his helm. He was the last to do so, and saw his less experienced battle-brothers checking the hermetic seals on their armour. If the life-eater got through, battleplate would provide little protection. But the Salamanders had never been a Legion quick to yield, even in the face of certain death.

'Incendiary units,' he voxed, and heard the command repeated across the Draconius Gate as legionary squads carrying flamers took up vanguard positions.

The noise was incredible, the roar of the conflagration against the slowly withering shriek of the contagion as it was put to flame. Without being able to see what was happening beyond the void shields, Numeon imagined two leviathans battling each other for supremacy.

'How much of this can we take?' said Zytos in a low voice, disturbing Numeon

from his thoughts.

‘We will know soon enough.’

The shelling lasted for almost twenty minutes before the augurs of the *Reaper’s Shroud* deemed it ineffective.

Nothing survived apart from the Drakes protected behind their walls of tempered ceramite, and for a few moments silence reigned across the cracked earth, save for the distant bellow of the deep drakes far below, disturbed from their slumber.

‘I hear a different kind of thunder, brother,’ said Zytos.

‘The wrath of the earth answers,’ Numeon replied.

‘They’ll hit us again and again, until we break,’ said Zytos.

‘We can hold here against anything that ship can muster. Reinforcements from Prometheus will arrive. They have to kill Vulkan quickly. To linger would be suicide. As soon as our erstwhile cousins see that they will come.’

Zytos smiled darkly, exchanging a brief glance with Numeon. ‘When they do, then we will have them.’

Conventional warheads followed in the wake of the failed virus bombing and these too met an impasse as they struck the formidable void shields.

For another eighteen minutes, the second bombardment continued without cessation. But as the thunder ebbed and the dust thinned across the massive plain, the Salamanders stood unscathed beneath their shields.

‘What now?’ asked Zytos. ‘More shelling?’

Numeon shook his head. ‘Now, we wait.’

The bombardment was over, and the actual attack would soon begin.

SIXTY-FIVE

Nocturne angers

Grand Cruiser Reaper's Shroud*, bridge*

Laestygon stood up from his throne and donned his helm.

Despite every belief he possessed about its efficacy as a military tactic, the virus bombing had failed.

So too, the subsequent bombardment. Whatever fortress the Drakes were holding Vulkan in had to be formidable.

He doubted it was well manned. After the devastation visited upon the Legion at Isstvan V, there could not be many Salamanders left.

Before the Preacher could raise any objections, Laestygon had determined to storm that fortress and take his trophy through force of arms. Nothing would stop him.

'Watch him,' he muttered to the two Death Guard legionaries standing guard on the bridge.

Laestygon glanced at Quor Gallek as he descended the command dais.

'I will have need of the Preacher once I return with Vulkan's body and the god-weapon.'

All pretence of an alliance between them had vanished with the *Monarchia'*s destruction and the death of Quor Gallek's men. Laestygon had made it known that he saw the Preacher as a tool, one he planned to use to its fullest extent and discard if he so chose.

He had no desire to let the treacherous cur take part in the assault where he could slip his grasp or betray the Death Guard. Better that the Preacher remain on board the *Reaper's Shroud.* The craven would not try anything whilst under XIV Legion guns; he did not have the stomach or guile for it.

Laestygon was on the verge of leaving the bridge when Quor Gallek's voice stopped him.

'You swore to me the fulgurite would be mine. A bargain you said.'

Laestygon laughed, a wet gurgle emanating from his throat.

'It will be, preacher, but in service to me.'

'That is not what we agreed.'

'Yes, but it is what I am offering. Unlike your daemons, I cannot be so easily bound by *pacts*.'

Laestygon left, his mocking laughter echoing in his wake.

Deep engine drone and the screaming descent of drop pods penetrated through the waspish hum of the voids.

In response, the earth trembled as deeply buried mechanisms were activated by the Techmarines. Cracks opened up in the ground, widening to chasms that became subterranean weapon silos from which macro-cannons and multi-launchers emerged.

Like rising leviathans, the dragon-mouthed barrels and launch tubes drooled dust and ash as they discharged salvoes of missiles and super-heavy shells.

Gunships daubed with Death Guard iconography fell out of the sky aflame and broken apart. Several struck the inviolable edge of the voids and exploded again, shattering in a welter of metal across the ionised energy sphere.

The earth trembled as the mountains spat their anger. Pillars of fire shot into the heavens, turning them red, and gouts of black smoke spewed down onto the plain.

Through the thickening cloud, Fire Raptors, Thunderhawks and Storm Eagles tried to force a landing.

Choking on the ash and cinder drawn up into its engines, a Fire Raptor ditched and crashed in a billowing explosion. Another lost a wing as lava spewed up from a subterranean vent and melted it off. The gunship spun and pinwheeled before colliding with another vessel struggling to see in the abject blackness. Both folded together before breaking apart as they struck the ground.

Despite the odds, a Storm Eagle achieved a landing, but before it could disgorge the legionaries, a chasm opened up beneath it, swallowing the gunship and the troops aboard.

As drop pods arrowed earthwards they disappeared into vast magma trenches, or were fused shut by immense geysers of super-heated steam.

It was as if Nocturne sensed invaders and rose up to destroy them.

Foolish was the warlord who attempted to assault a death world, even if that warlord was a legionary. On Nocturne, the Salamanders held a distinct advantage, and no amount of obstinate force could truly match that.

The Death Guard were learning the extent of that miscalculation as what had at first seemed like inevitable victory became much more tenuous, and potentially hard fought.

But Laestygon would not be denied. He hadn't risen this high and climbed the ranks by giving in to adversity. Vulkan would die by his hand, even if Nocturne itself stood against him.

For deadly as the world was, he knew it could not prevent the landfall of such a large force in its entirety.

The Death Guard hurtled down in droves, quickly establishing a beachhead a few kilometres from the edge of the void shields. Heavy landers came in the wake of the smaller troop transports and gunships, bringing forth armoured Land Raiders and Sicaran battle tanks. Soon the voids rippled with iridescent blooms from the sustained fire of lascannons and Herakles-pattern autocannons. The war engines began to cohere into armoured battalions, rolling over the rock and earth on scorched black treads, their hulls painted grey with ash.

Behind the shields, the serried ranks of Salamanders stood and watched.

They had three gunships and no armour on the ground.

Detachments of heavy weapons were brought up to firing slits and gaps in the ramparts but they could not hope to stop the Death Guard's armoured host, which had been joined by Cerberus and Spartan battle tanks.

And at the head of the formation, Numeon saw the bulk of a Typhon siege tank.

'That is a lot of armour,' he said.

'They'll tear the shields down with that much firepower,' murmured Zytos.

Already weakened by the bombardment, Numeon knew the voids would not hold for long. After they failed, the Death Guard would pulverise the Draconius Gate until it and everyone harboured within its fastness was dust.

He scowled, frustrated as fate turned again. But there was still a chance...

'We could try and get Vulkan out?' suggested Zytos. 'Take him to Prometheus.'

'And where then, brother?' Numeon shook his head. 'No, we make our stand now. Here. On Nocturne. This is our world, and we alone are its best defence. Besides, that much armour creates a lot of seismic disturbance.'

Zytos grunted appreciatively. 'And to think I once wondered why the Legion was always so careful deploying heavy armour on Nocturne.'

Numeon gave a feral smile behind his snarling mask. 'We won't be alone for

long.’

As if in empathy, the mountains thundered again and found their indignation answered by what dwelled below. As the Death Guard tanks rolled inexorably onwards, the earth beneath them was split by chasms, and through disgorged smoke something emerged from the depths.

The sons and daughters of Nocturne had many names for them, just as they had many names for fire. Here, the ignorant invaders had stepped into immolus without even realising it. *Gnarlwyrm, urdrake, basilysk, wyvern, drakon, targon,* the monstrous tide appeared endless.

They spilled from the deep crags, fissures in the rock that had lain undisturbed for centuries. Long spits of flame from the maws of urdrakes melted tank armour to slag, whilst gouts of incendiary gas spewed by drakons fused battleplate and boiled the flesh of crew trapped within.

Overhead, wyverns and targons took flight before sweeping down out of the sun to rip turrets and rend bodies. The horned gnarlwyrms, largest of the beasts, charged at the heaviest armour. The thunder of their cloven hooves shook the earth with tectonic fury. Swarms of basilysks came in the wake of the gnarlwyrms, crushing whatever machineries still functioned between their constricting coils.

Battle cannons responded as a rapid redeployment was effected, but the thick leathern hide, bone crests and carapace of the beasts proved inviolate against all but the most potent of the Death Guard arsenal.

Crushed, gored, snapped in half, the tanks could not withstand such an onslaught. On pinioned wing, by tooth and claw, spewing fire or corrosive gas, these drakes had even challenged the will of a primarch. They ripped out the heart of the XIV Legion war host with impunity.

Numeon looked on grimly and aghast, as did every Salamander. Only Rhy’tan appeared unmoved, a statuesque sentinel awaiting an end to the incursion.

‘They rise for him,’ he uttered, without investing the words with unnecessary import. ‘Nocturne angers.’

‘Merciful Vulkan…’ breathed Zytos, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his eyes.

‘Do not pity them, Zytos,’ said Numeon.

‘I do not, but I have never borne witness to such…’ Words could not convey what they all saw.

‘Nor I.’

Nomus Rhy’tan’s voice rose up over the vox.

‘Lower all shields. We attack now!’

Numeon heard a click as Rhy’tan hailed the Pyre captain over his private vox channel.

‘Will you join us, Captain Numeon, and fight alongside the Firedrakes once more?’

Numeon’s heart swelled with fierce pride and a desire to mete out vengeance against the Death Guard. ‘It would be an honour, Lord Chaplain.’

As the beasts of the deeps laid waste to the enemy’s armour, the Salamanders took advantage of the distraction by sallying forth from the Draconius Gate.

A few battle-brothers were left behind to hold the bunkers and protect Vulkan. The Techmarine Covenant, along with Gargo, remained also to man its static guns. The rest broke up into battle formations. Tactical support squads bearing flamers poured forwards in the vanguard, whilst heavy support squads made for the flanks or higher ground. Behind the vanguard came a clenched fist of veteran Firedrakes. There were scarcely fifty of these warriors but with the presence of Nomus Rhy’tan and Artellus Numeon, they were formidable.

Bolter-armed battle-brothers flanked them either side. It would be their job, along with the vanguard, to deliver the veterans into the heart of the fighting where they could cause the most damage.

Nigh-on eight hundred Salamanders crossed the fire-blackened plain where the sand had turned to glass and crunched beneath their booted feet. A terrible host bayed and clawed before them, rending vehicles and stomping warriors to dust.

‘We are heading into that?’ asked Zytos, incredulous. ‘I have killed many of those beasts. Smaller, yes, but the vein of enmity between us runs deep, I think.’

The drakes of Nocturne were rampant, and laid about them with abandon. Scores of tanks and hundreds of legionaries lay broken by their rampage, though monstrous carcasses stained the earth too. All was left to rot in the pitiless sun.

‘I doubt they will remember you, brother,’ said Numeon, his mood lighter than it had been in many months. It felt good to stand with a war host again.

Across the Draconius Gate the vox-horn sounded over and over, heralding the call to arms.

Mauled by Nocturne’s oldest denizens, the Death Guard were reeling and their armoured battalions all but vanquished. When the Salamanders hit them hard, they reeled again.

But these were still warriors of the XIV and they had numbers on their side in spite of the beating they had taken.

Slowly, they began to reorganise. And as the Salamanders came in at close

quarters the beasts began to relent. As savagely and suddenly as they had begun, the drakes returned to the earth without need of encouragement.

The Death Guard rallied. Artillery sections hustled into formation, tearing gaps into the Drakes' vanguard. Talons of Contemptors that had survived the monstrous assault began to lay down fire.

Lascannon and culverin beams speared into the Dreadnoughts, cutting them apart. Overhead, the sound of quad mortars from the Draconius Gate broke across the plain, dropping heavy payloads into the still reforming rear ranks of the Death Guard. The 'thud guns' were well named, and their thunderous salvoes kept the enemy legionaries from forming a counter-charge.

The rally of the XIV Legion stuttered and struggled to find purchase. Every time their defiance arose, it was quickly crushed as flame units closed in and burned away all resistance.

Heavy bolters, autocannons and missile launchers maintained a dense hail of fire from the high ground and embedded gun emplacements on the walls. One ridge line exploded as a Death Guard plasma cannon section managed to retaliate, killing several Drakes, but the Salamander heavies were dug in well and survived.

As the Death Guard cannons moved up for a second barrage, they were swallowed by a lava trench that yawned open beneath them. Other legionaries clad in scorched white plate were blinded by erupting steam vents, only to be cut down by the host of implacable Firedrakes.

Even with its scaled denizens fought off and now quiescent, the earth itself still seemed to rebel against the invaders.

The deadly unpredictability of the terrain eventually began to tell, and as the Death Guard's superior numbers dwindled and the Salamanders continued to carve them up piecemeal, Nomus Rhy'tan led his veterans to their rival command section. But it was Numeon who caught the gaze of their leader across the fierce melee.

Laestygon felt his fragile grip on Nocturne weakening. In his mind's eye, he saw his banner in tatters, faded in ignominy.

Then he railed against it. None had fought as hard as he. Death and defeat had risen to try and claim him over and over again, but he had resisted. He would resist it again now.

I will be remembered, he thought, striding across the bitter, choking sand plain. *On this rancid world, I shall make an indelible mark in history.*

As he took a slatted view of the carnage through his visor, Laestygon realised there was no subtlety to this fight, that fine tactics would not win the field. It had become a dirty scrum, a brutal close-quarter engagement. *This* style of warfare he knew. He had fought it his entire existence.

Behind the mask of his war-helm, Laestygon smiled.

He could see their leader, the draconic officer clad in scales, cutting down warriors like they were little more than wooden staves.

'There,' he called to his Terminator veterans. 'That one.'

Numeon was well aware that Barbarans were lauded for their resilience, but even the sons of Mortarion could not withstand the beating they had just taken and hope to hold their ground against an equally tenacious enemy.

Across the field of battle, the Salamanders crushed what remained of the Death Guard's resistance until only its warlord and his loyal warriors were left.

Nomus Rhy'tan bellowed like a urdrake, as Firedrakes met Death Guard Terminators.

The clash was brutal, and veteran warriors fell on either side in the first few seconds of the fighting.

Thunder hammers broke nigh-on inviolable war-plate apart as the Salamanders bludgeoned their enemies implacably. For their part, the Death Guard cleaved and stabbed with lightning claws. One drake was felled by a power fist, only for his killer to die under a hail of retaliatory blows.

As the brutal skirmish unfolded, Rhy'tan and a clutch of warriors were drawn into combat against a Contemptor.

Even Zytos had been pushed out of position by the lethal ebb and flow of the fight.

It left Numeon alone to face the Death Guard warlord.

As he met him across the corpse-strewn, wreckage-choked terrain, the Barbaran called out.

'Are you the prophet, the one I chased across the storm?'

He was bleeding from a dozen rents in his armour, and snarled with rad-scarred lips, his war-helm long gone. His retainers were almost finished, dispatched by Rhy'tan's Firedrakes as the Lord Chaplain himself took apart the last Dreadnought.

'To you, I am the ender of all things,' said Numeon.

Draukoros had bitten deep of the Death Guard, and though he was weary, the Pyre captain knew this was the one he had to kill.

The Death Guard scoffed, as if he could reverse fate. His blade was slick with the blood of Numeon's brothers. Numeon would ensure this foetid wretch would anoint it no further.

'You should not have come here. It was an error. You lost your claim on my life when you let us slip through your dirty fingers, traitor. Look around you,' he invited.

There were but he and Numeon on this part of the field. Scores of bodies surrounded them, mostly clad in begrimed white. Numeon glanced at the Firedrakes about to encroach, warning them off. This was his enemy to kill.

The Barbaran appeared unfazed by his sudden shift in fortune.

He actually laughed, then formed an ugly grin through decayed teeth.

'Know my name, drake,' he said, as if about to claim conquest for Barbarus, 'he who has set foot upon your soil. Who has brought death to Nocturne. Who will claim the head of your lord and father. Remember it. I am Malig Laes–'

Draukoros thrust into the traitor's neck, silencing anything further.

As Numeon wrenched the sword free, the Death Guard dropped his blade, a chipped but sharp kukra, and tried to staunch the bleeding.

Numeon cut off his head.

'No one will remember you, traitor. Least of all me.'

A bloodied Zytos joined Numeon on the battlefield as he cleaned his sword.

As they clasped forearms, he swung his thunder hammer onto his shoulder.

'Feels good to purge Nocturnean soil,' he said, looking around at the carnage. His gaze lingered on the headless corpse of the Death Guard warlord, but only fleetingly.

'And the desert will take their corpses.'

Zytos smiled ruefully. 'Xathen would have relished this battle.'

'He, Var'kir, and everyone we have lost to get this far will be remembered. In Vulkan's name.'

'Aye, in Vulkan's name.'

With the defeat of their leader, the Death Guard were in full retreat.

Rhy'tan emerged from the slowly dissipating smoke. Like the others, his armour was battered but his spirit soaring.

'It seems Nocturne is quiescent once more,' he told them both.

'What of the *Reaper's Shroud?*' asked Numeon.

'Warships are inbound from Prometheus, *Vulkan's Wrath* and the *Drakelord,* to ensure Nocturne's skies are ours again.'

‘Then there is but one task remaining,’ said Numeon as his eyes fell upon the forbidding Mount Deathfire. ‘Vulkan’s resurrection.’

Rhy’tan watched Numeon for a few moments before he began walking away.

‘Brother-captain,’ he called. ‘After you have cleansed your war-plate and weapons, come and speak with me. I said there would be time for talk. That time is upon us.’

Aboard the *Reaper’s Shroud* the alert sirens had reached a fever pitch.

Fires ran rampant through the ship, its shields were down and according to its augurs two strike cruiser-class vessels were inbound from the Prometheus moon, where they had been docked.

No hierarchy remained, no order existed. Only chaos.

The last two Death Guard legionaries lay dead on the bridge, the blood from their torn throats and bodies still pooling. Inexplicably, their battleplate had provided no defence against the knife. It had cut them open as if they wore nothing but cloth instead of hardy adamantium and ceramite.

None amongst the crew had dared stand in the Preacher’s way after that, and he had said nothing as he left.

The only evidence of his existence was the absence of a ship, taken from one of the few launch bays that still functioned. Its destination was unknown to everyone, save its pilot.

But as he flew the diminutive ship, Quor Gallek praised Lorgar for his deliverance and the powers of Ruin for the sliver of fulgurite still in his possession.

SIXTY-SIX

Into the fire

Nocturne, the Draconius Gate, vault

Nomus Rhy'tan waited in shadows, a flickering fire the only light in the humble vault. He stood before Vulkan's casket, his eyes closed as if deep in thought, or mourning.

'Lord Chaplain.' Numeon's voice ventured from the darkness.

'Stand with me, brother,' said Rhy'tan, his tone solemn.

Numeon did as asked.

'Tell me, Artellus, what do you see in that casket that others do not?'

'I see my father and the potential for his return.'

'Why? Because you *want* it to be so, you *need* it?'

'Because it is. I believe it.'

'You were equerry to our primarch, arguably his closest confidant in the Legion and sworn to protect him.'

Numeon turned, frowning. 'Are you saying I failed him?'

'I am saying you may feel guilty for his death. I am saying your grief for his passing is probably more acute than any son of Nocturne. It does not surprise me that you cling to the belief in his resurrection.'

'I cling to nothing. I *know* Vulkan will rise. I can feel it. Does the Promethean creed not preach rebirth? What of the Circle of Fire?'

'It refers to spiritual rebirth, Numeon. As one is given up to the earth, only then can another rise. It is figurative. *You* are Vulkan reborn. In you, in us, are his teachings made immortal, his wisdom sacrosanct.'

'Perhaps in such secular times that was true, but in ancient days could the Circle of Fire have referred to true resurrection? Our father *is* immortal, after

all.'

'Myths, brother, from a dark age of blood sacrifice that Vulkan himself put asunder.'

'And what era is this then, if not a "dark age" where more than blood is sacrificed?'

Rhy'tan sighed. 'What did Var'kir believe?' he asked. 'I heard Sergeant Zytos make mention of him. I was his mentor, and as such he was amongst the Igniax, acting as spiritual advisor to you, was he not?'

'Yes, he was also my friend.'

'Indeed, but what did he believe? Whatever it was, he gave his life to see it done.'

'I witnessed miracles. The hand of Vulkan at my shoulder.'

'I have no doubt of that. Vulkan's blood burns strongly in you, Numeon, but *what* did Var'kir believe?'

Numeon's expression darkened, but he refused to allow his doubts to resurface.

'He believed that Vulkan was dead, and here on Nocturne he would find peace.'

'And you don't believe that.'

'Vulkan must rise.'

'For him or for you, brother?'

Numeon scowled, and found his anger rising.

'For the Legion, for all of us. For the war.'

'And if, despite your beliefs, he returns to the mountain and does not rise, what then?'

'I don't understand.'

Rhy'tan smiled sadly.

'No, I don't think you do.'

'Is there anything further?' said Numeon, his anger turning into belligerence. 'Deathfire awaits.'

Shaking his head, Rhy'tan gave Numeon his leave.

Smoke rose from the dormant caldera of Mount Deathfire. A low rumble persisted in the depths beneath a sharp refrain of crackling magma and the slow dissolution of rock, as if the mountain itself were in mourning.

Ash and cinder gathered in the wide craggy basin where the sons of Vulkan had mustered in solemn ranks. They bore their drake-hide cloaks proudly – the mantles fluttering in the hot, sulphurous breeze – and their war-helms were clasped in the crooks of their arms.

Fewer than eight hundred souls had gathered to bear witness, a paltry gathering but all that the Salamanders could muster in such beleaguered times. Every one bore the brander's mark that would remember this deed. None had received it before, for to witness the death of the primarch was unique.

Amongst them stood Numeon and those who had made it through the storm.

A mournful tattoo sounded above the strident bellow of the mountain, drummed by the Salamanders rapping their knuckles against their pauldrons. Anvils placed around the edge of the caldera rang out in unison as Gargo and the other black-smiters brought hammer against steel.

Vulkan's body lay upon a bier of granite, at last divested of its casket. The hammer *Dawnbringer* lay across his chest, still clenched in his fists. The fulgurite, a thorn in his flesh, the fell spearhead that had ended Vulkan's immortal life, remained impaled in his heart as a grim reminder of his mortal death.

Ceremonial chains wrapped around Vulkan's arms and legs, torso and neck. Four strands trailed from the body, fed through thick iron links bolted into the igneous rock at the four cardinal points. Promethean creed held these chains would bind the warrior's spirit to his body, so both would return to the flame together and be given back unto the earth as one.

Head bowed in solemnity, Nomus Rhy'tan stood before the bier. At his raised fist, the drumming and the chiming of anvils ceased.

For a few moments, there was just the rumbling of the mountain and the low moan of the wind. Then Rhy'tan began to speak. He used the old tongue, the language of the ancient tribes, as he appealed to the mountain and the earth to accept their adopted son and return him to Nocturne.

'In ash, shall he be delivered,' uttered Rhy'tan, 'his flame undiminished. We who stand on the precipice of destruction, bear witness to his passage.'

Slowly, the chains began to unfurl as legionaries around the caldera took up their weight.

A cadre of Firedrakes, two at the feet and two at the shoulders, heaved Vulkan up from his bier of stone and held him aloft until the chains had been pulled taut enough to support his body.

'Lord of Drakes, saviour of Nocturne, glorious son of the Emperor of Mankind, Vulkan, we commit you to fire.'

Rhy'tan spoke the words and the Firedrakes released Vulkan's body as it was slowly drawn out into the heart of the caldera.

Smoke billowed up from the maw of the mountain, wreathing his armoured

form where it lay suspended by the great chains. Gradually, inexorably, Vulkan was lowered into the deep pit.

Captured flame reflected in his polished war-plate, which had begun to blacken with the heat.

‘In the heart of the mountain you shall burn eternal, a beacon for those who remain, a reminder of your teachings and wisdom.’

As the links fed through their rings of iron, the body descended until it was lost from sight and its weight tugging on the chains was the only evidence of its continued existence.

‘Unto the anvil, oh Lord of Drakes! Our father and primarch!’

Rhy’tan reached down to thrust his hand in the burning ash at his feet.

All except the chain-bearers did the same, before daubing the hot ash across their faces in the sigil of resurrection. It did not mean a literal revivification but rather symbolised a rebirth in kind or spirit.

As the burning ash seared their flesh, the Salamanders bellowed Vulkan’s name so the earth would remember it and heed them if they ever had cause to invoke it.

Pulling the obsidian hammer from his back, Rhy’tan struck the bier and split it in half.

The chain-bearers let go and Vulkan plummeted into the mouth of the volcano. The fire took him, and it was done.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Circle of Fire

Vulkan had not risen.

After nine days, he had not returned. He remained as ash, at one with the earth. Nocturne mourned, its mountains quiescent, its deserts and ash plains silent but for the susurration of the wind. Nothing stirred, no rock or scrap of earth. The sun rose and fell, the great beasts of the deep slumbered.

War, and the memory of its coming, faded. The world reclaimed that which had sought to despoil it until nothing remained in sight of the Draconius Gate but ash.

Numeon walked. He did so alone, for in his grief he could find no comfort in brotherhood or the companionship of others.

A low tremor resonated underfoot. He had felt it ever since leaving the fastness. Zytos had a garrison there now, one of many outposts to maintain a vigil over the land.

None had seen him leave, Numeon made sure of that. He had left his battleplate and his weapons behind, venturing out into the desert in little more than fatigues. The bare metal of his interface ports, those which linked him via the black carapace to his power armour, felt searing hot to the touch. The sun was at his back now, glaring with hateful intensity.

Numeon defied it. He had defied everyone and every obstacle in his path, yet still it was not enough.

Anger followed, and with it a determination not to accept his fate or the fate of his primarch.

Weary, exhausted, he sank to his knees in the burning sand and cried out to the

sky.

'What more do you ask of me? I have given all. Please, what more is there?'

An answer came with the rumbling of thunder, and the presage of a storm. The tremor below was intensifying, growing into a seismic event that would send the mountains into apoplexy and drown the earth in fire.

Numeon bowed his head, fists clenched against his body as he fought to deny the inevitable truth.

Vulkan is dead.

Everything they had endured, all that had been lost, his dead brothers and the mortals who had served them dutifully, all for nought. A sacrifice without reward.

Without purpose.

Distantly, he heard the warning horns blare across the desert. With the Time of Trial imminent, all Nocturneans were being called back to the cities and the outposts for their own protection.

Few but the mad and desperate went out into the storm. Numeon was both.

He rose to his feet, finding an inner resolve he thought he lacked, and saw his destination loom ahead of him.

'Deathfire.'

Through the scopes, Zytos watched the procession of mortals through the distant gates of Themis.

He was standing on the wall of the Wyvern Hold, amongst the sentries but not so close that he could not enjoy his relative solitude.

Soon the gates of the Sanctuary City would close and the void shields would rise. Any beyond its borders after that would be sealed outside and left to the mercy of the elements.

The neophytes had responded well to training and seven detachments had been formed from their number. As soon as the storm ebbed, they would embark on ships bound for Terra. Zytos only hoped it would not be too late and that there was still an important role for the Salamanders to play in the outcome of the war.

Too long, they had been broken or sitting idle. He had hoped Numeon would lead them. He hoped still. He had even begun to believe that Vulkan might return against all odds. That hope died when they interred the primarch's body into the mountain. It ended false beliefs, and brought about a sense of finality and closure so that the Legion could be reforged.

Vulkan was dead, and so now another had to claim the old title of Legion

Master. If not Nomus Rhy'tan, then it could be but one other.

It was only when the void shields activated with their actinic hum and the faint reek of cordite, that Zytos asked aloud, 'Where is Numeon?'

Smoke had gathered at the foot of the mountain, though Numeon could see to its summit. Crags like claws reached for a sky the hue of spilled blood, and fire reigned above as the mountain spat its anger.

As the earth trembled, a bleak mood fell upon Numeon that left him feeling hollowed, cursed.

His feet were badly blistered, worn bloody and raw by the many leagues he had walked across the desert.

It had not been forgiving. But he knew his journey slowly reached its end with every bloody step he left behind him.

Slowly, perhaps inevitably, he began to ascend the mountain's flank. Ash and cinder burned his skin, but he could barely feel it any more. He rose, hand over hand; the climb was tough but he was beyond fatigue now.

A darkness pulled at him, a deep well of grief from which he could not escape. Though his limbs screamed in agony and his flesh burned, the numbness of his mind kept him going with monotonous, dead-eyed determination.

Despair gnawed at his resolve, but he had enough will left for this.

A deep rumble came from above, louder than the roar of oceans. It echoed across the mountain, across the desert, and the land began to break apart.

One eye on the summit and the flood of lava its wrath surely presaged, Numeon almost missed the fissure in the rock. Heat poured from the vent, which was partially obscured by smoke.

A deep crack resonated up the side of the mountain as a massive pillar of lava soared upwards to touch the clouds with fire.

In desperation, Numeon scrambled for the fissure and gladly crawled through it into the darkness beyond. A swathe of pyroclastic cloud swept over the craggy aperture through which Numeon had passed. But when the cloud parted and the mountain bled with liquid fire, the fissure was gone, as if it had never been there in the first place, and Numeon with it.

A sacrifice.

A squadron of Sky Hunters sped across the desert. As soon as the void shields had come down, Zytos had led out the search party.

The jetbikes were battered and repurposed, but they were by far the quickest way to cross the ash plains. Zytos remembered the trappings left behind in the

vault where Vulkan's casket still remained. Inside, they had found Numeon's weapons, armour, even the sigil itself.

Without wishing to acknowledge it, Zytos knew what his captain had come out here to do.

A voice crackled across the vox. Abidemi.

'*I have something.*'

Zytos locked the coordinates from his feed into the navigation console on the jetbike.

'I'm coming, brother,' he said, cutting the feed and beginning to hope that Numeon might have somehow survived.

They found him huddled on the plain, half buried in ash and in sight of Mount Deathfire.

Zytos had drawn up alongside Gargo and Abidemi, the black-smiter having received a bionic graft to replace his missing limb.

'Slow down,' Zytos warned them both.

Eager though they were to reach their stricken captain, were he wounded then the last thing Numeon needed was to be showered by flung ash from the engine wake of the jetbikes.

All three decelerated, closing on the distant figure. Definitely, a Salamander. Alive but weak.

Zytos voxed back to the Draconius Gate for an Apothecary to reconnoitre with them on the ash plain. As he approached the figure, he slowed down to a crawl and then stopped, dismounting and leaving the jetbike hovering but locked in place.

'Brother,' he began, moving closer. He was but a few strides away now but Numeon had his head down and must not have heard.

Gargo and Abidemi were close behind, Zytos heard the crunch of their footfalls.

'Numeon?'

As he approached, Zytos reached out, but stopped short of touching his brother's shoulder when he realised something was wrong.

'Is he alive?' asked Gargo, readying what few medical provisions he had been able to carry.

'In the name of…' Zytos fell to his knees as his words trailed away.

It was not Numeon. Someone else was huddled but breathing on the ash plain.

Abidemi stopped as soon as he saw who it was.

Gargo was last to realise, but none of them could be mistaken as the figure rose

unsteadily to his feet, a hand clenched around a spear tip still embedded in his chest.

‘My sons…’ said Vulkan.

Vulkan lives...

AFTERWORD

Remember back at the start, back when the Horus Heresy was still young? We opened the saga with a trilogy, and after that there was a great diaspora of storylines as the series expanded and extrapolated out of necessity and a desire to explore and create.

It took a while to come back to the idea of truly connected storytelling, as was in the opening three books. Sure, there was connective tissue linking the books, mainly the primarchs and the Legions, but the stage had grown so large and so epic that the idea of sequels seemed a little impossible.

Now, as we enter the final stages of the Horus Heresy – and, genuinely, we are in that place, the 'Age of Darkness' era – I found myself approaching a sequel in my own trilogy within the Heresy.

I was a fairly late arrival to the Heresy scene, but had managed to stake a pretty strong claim to that oft-neglected Legion the Salamanders, and their indomitable primarch Vulkan.

Back when I pitched and was then writing *Vulkan Lives*, I had a very rough framework in mind for how the next two books would pan out to effectively tell his story. All of it, in full, up to the end. I speak frequently with the other writers, all of them fine chaps and some I would consider actual friends, but I don't know of any one of them that had planned out a character's arc as I had done with Vulkan. It probably helped that my focus was fixed solely on one story, of one Legion and one primarch.

So, when it came to write *Deathfire*, I had a strong idea as to what I wanted to achieve with the story and, more importantly, where I needed the characters to be

at the end of it to set things up for a grand finale.

They say that sequels are tough, especially after a successful debut. By all accounts, *Vulkan Lives* went down very well (if it didn't, I wouldn't be writing this afterword for a follow up, despite all my planning). It felt like it had meat and purpose, momentum… moving the story forward. Indeed, I wish I'd had more time to explore Isstvan V, but the place where we were at in the meta-narrative of the series would not allow for that, nor would the hordes of baying fans (you, dear reader) who wanted some serious forward movement.

Nonetheless, *Vulkan Lives* had the mother of all twists, the notion that Vulkan is immortal; moreover, he cannot be killed… at least, not by conventional means. It also had the core of an intriguing conflict, both physical and psychological, between two primarchs. What wholesome and filling material for any writer to get his literary teeth into, yes?

So, it was with a little trepidation that I approached *Deathfire*. In the 'wrangling' process, that odd, nebulous period when a writer is mainly thinking and planning, and not actually writing, the book went through several different iterations. There's an entire, meaty subplot that never made it into the novel. This was for several reasons. Some of it related to time and space, but the main driver for shelving it was one of focus. I wanted this book to be all about the Salamanders, their character, what they believe, why they believe it. The subplot I had in mind (cool as it was) would have diluted that focus and left the core of the book diminished. Sometimes, it's facing up to these tough choices and then having the courage to make them that helps you turn the corner as far as getting the novel you want, and the one you believe your readers want, is concerned.

So it was with *Deathfire*.

It was an entirely different prospect to *Vulkan Lives*, since it didn't/couldn't feature Vulkan, although his presence is felt throughout, but rather focused on a key group of his legionaries.

Even before getting started on my sequel (remember what I said about them being tough), I had some baggage to resolve from Dan's novel, *The Unremembered Empire*. We had colluded, you see, pre and post *Vulkan Lives*. We were literary athletes in the narrative equivalent of a relay race with Vulkan as the baton. Dan took him to the place I needed him to be to pick up the ragged pieces for *Deathfire*. I salute him for that, because he handled it superbly.

But, still, there was baggage to resolve.

Getting Vulkan and the Salamanders out of Imperium Secundus was tricky. The main reason was because I needed this part of the story to feel believable and

have weight, but at the same time couldn't spend too long on it as the actual story of *Deathfire* is of the Salamanders' odyssey back to Nocturne.

There are strong themes in this book. First and foremost is that of grief. As I was writing, I had the five stages of grief on a post-it note above my iMac. Here, in these five words, was Numeon's journey. All the Salamanders are hurting, but it's Numeon that really feels it, that experiences it and refuses to accept, until the very end, that Vulkan is dead.

Much like the *Charybdis* and its crew (oh, and the references to *The Odyssey* are deliberate, of course), Numeon has a spiritual and mental journey that he has to go on before he's able to accept his fate (that he will never see Vulkan again). There's tragedy to that, I think. He is the one character that drives the rest to bring Vulkan back and defy all the odds, and he's the only character that cannot ever see his father rise from the ashes.

Obviously then, another of the book's themes is resurrection. I have always alluded to the idea of rebirth and transformation in my Salamander novels and stories, but in *Deathfire* it is at its most overt. Because of the Legion's association with fire and the earth, it felt natural to assume their cultural language and belief system would hinge on principles like rebirth and transformation.

There's a mystical, otherworldly aspect to the story too. The exact 'how' of the Salamanders reaching Nocturne through the storm is deliberately vague and relies a lot on their belief that they can and they will. It is much the same as how Vulkan rises from death. It is miraculous, but then so is he.

At the start of all this blathering about *Deathfire*, I mentioned that the books formed a trilogy, echoing back to that first trilogy which opened the series. The last book will round the whole, epic saga off. It wouldn't be appropriate to talk about that here. Besides, I haven't started it yet, it's still in that pre-embryonic planning stage.

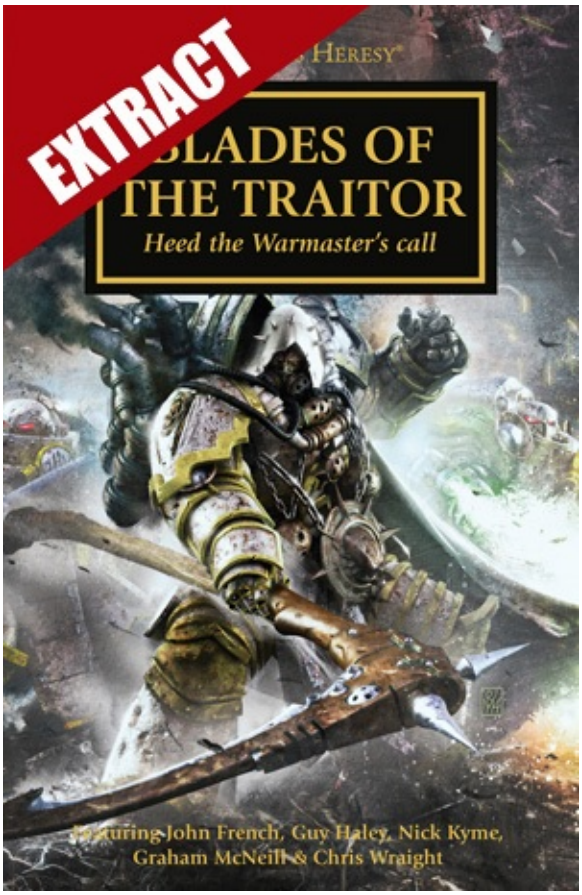
I do know I'll be sad to see it end, but we are not there just yet. Not yet.

Nick Kyme
February 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deathfire* and *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella 'Feat of Iron' was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. For the Warhammer 40,000 universe, Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* for the War of Vengeance series. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

An extract from *Blades of the Traitor*.



An extract from 'Twisted' by Guy Haley.

The *Vengeful Spirit* had changed. Horus had changed. But the tedious intricacies of running a warfleet had not. Warfare was warfare, whether conducted at the behest of the Council of Terra or the urging of howling gods. It always came down to the numbers.

The fifty-eighth petitioner to the Warmaster that day was a short logistician, principally composed of fat and fear. He blinked and mumbled his way through his request, eyes sliding every second – if not more often – to the pair of Justaerin Terminators flanking the basalt throne at the heart of Lupercal's Court.

No one sat upon the throne. It was the throne of the primarch, and none but he might occupy it.

Horus was absent. The Warmaster had no time for petty concerns.

Maloghurst, the equerry of the Warmaster, sat in judgment in his stead on a stool by the throne's dais. Were it not for his own great personal presence, he might have looked ridiculous. The throne was sized for a demigod, the dais tall, the court that surrounded it dizzyingly high and ornate. Battle honours stirred in ventilation draughts. Stars glared mercilessly from the void through armourglass ports. Blue shadows jealously guarded the statues and weapons set into the walls.

Horus was not there, but his presence steeped the court.

Maloghurst was insignificant in comparison – worse, he was far from the most perfect of Horus's sons. His back was perpetually slanted, a cane forever close to hand – he was a fallen angel whose imperfections were made all the more glaring in his master's shadow.

His back was broken, but his intellect was not. Twisted in mind as well as body. Maloghurst's name had become a byword for fear.

The fat man's lips stumbled to a stop.

‘In three days’ time, we are due to engage in the assault on Lamrys,’ said Maloghurst, ‘and you choose *now* to bring this trivial matter to my attention?’ His voice growled threateningly from behind his respirator. He wore his armour and his mouthpiece constantly, more or less. His battleplate had become a crutch.

Still, the logistician blanched.

‘I am sorry, my lord, but the correct scheduling of fuel distribution prior to the attack is of great importance. It must be performed before we approach the mid-system line. I cannot fulfil my role if–’

Maloghurst cut him off by rapping his cane hard against the marble floor. The crack echoed and multiplied from the walls.

‘All of us are burdened. Do you choose to consider your burden to be greater than that of the Warmaster?’

‘No, my lord!’

‘This is Lupercal’s Court.’ Maloghurst pointed to a wide arch. ‘Through there the Warmaster has his staterooms. I am the Warmaster’s equerry. Here you are but one step from the ear of our Lord Horus himself. You should be mindful of what you choose to speak into it.’

‘My lord, forgive me. I will make greater efforts. I require only a little aid.’ The fat man gulped. His attention had latched itself fully upon the Justaerin.

Maloghurst grasped the skull atop his cane. ‘Do not look to them. I could kill you myself without difficulty.’

He pushed his weight down upon the slender stick of ebony and heaved himself to his feet, and limped from his seat to the logistician. The fat man threw himself down on his hands and knees, but Maloghurst bent low. Grabbing a loose handful of hair and augmetic interface tendrils, he hauled the adept into the air, transhuman muscles bearing the weight easily, although his bones protested at the load. The logistician gaped, his mouth opening and closing moistly as he desperately tried not to scream. Tears welled from screwed-tight eyes to bead his cheeks.

Maloghurst stared him full in the face. ‘What would the Warmaster do, should he find himself in such a situation?’

The man smelled sour. Rank sweat and desperation mingled unwholesomely. Maloghurst suspected he would not answer for fear that the wrong response would end his life. He was correct in that assumption.

But the logistician was more clever than he seemed.

‘The Warmaster, in any situation, would find a way of achieving his desired result,’ he gasped.

Maloghurst admired the man's calmness in the face of death. That, more than his answer, saved his life.

'Yes! Whether that be toppling the lying Emperor or delivering the right amount of supplies to four insignificant cruiser squadrons!' He released the man. 'Get out. Do your duty without complaint. If I see you here again, I will tear your heart from your chest.'

Maloghurst turned and went back to the stool by the throne. Sparks of pain tickled his fused spine and pelvis. He gritted his teeth as he retook his seat.

Pain had been one of two constants in Maloghurst's life for some time. The other was responsibility.

An unwelcome third had recently made itself known to him.

Vulnerability.

He was vulnerable, more so with each passing day. He had always been respected, but he had never been well liked. There was a feral mood upon the Legion of late. Old practices long suppressed now resurfaced – the savage face of Cthonia revealed as the facade of calm imposed by the Emperor was abraded by war. Rivalries had become more pronounced, more violent.

His closeness to Horus provoked jealousy. In a society of warriors, his attention to more cerebral matters marked him out for derision.

And so the distance between himself and his brothers yawned wider on the one hand. No great matter, were it not that on the other the gulf between Horus and himself also grew. No human or transhuman could ever hope to knowingly inveigle themselves with a primarch, but for two hundred years their friendship had at least bridged the fundamental gap between them.

Recently, Horus had grown far beyond mortal concerns. Ever since Molech.

None would challenge Horus's authority, but they would dare to challenge Maloghurst for the primarch's favour and the chance to influence the Warmaster. There was a sense of exposure growing in him that he had never felt before. Maloghurst had become a target.

But danger would not keep him from his duty.

'Next,' he said, with a heavy breath.

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